THE SECRET
OF MAGNOLIA MANOR

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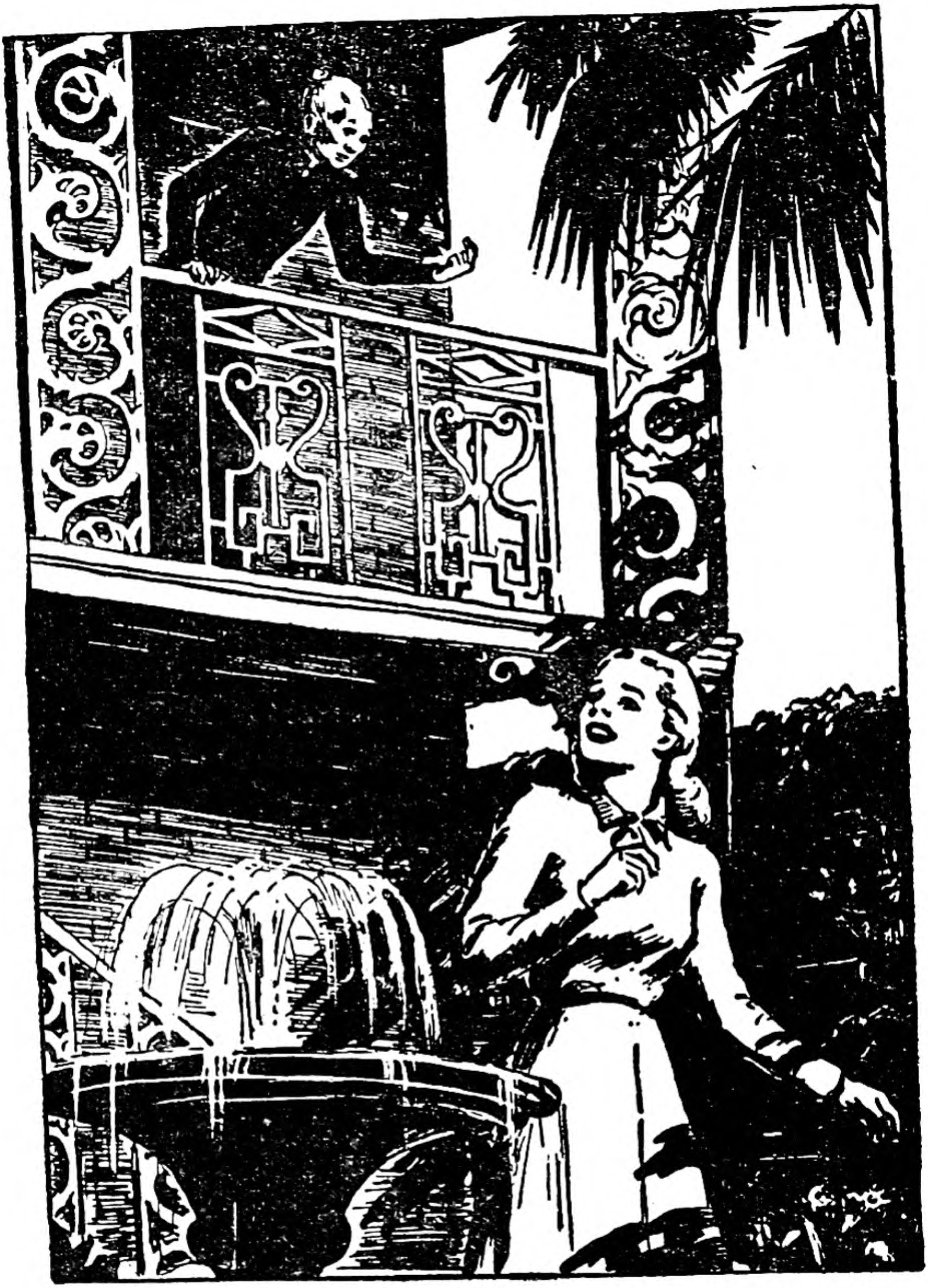
The Vicki Barr Flight Stewardess Series

SILVER WINGS FOR VICKI
VICKI FINDS THE ANSWER
THE HIDDEN VALLEY MYSTERY
THE SECRET OF MAGNOLIA MANOR



"Come up, mademoiselle. I know something about Etienne Breaux's will which might interest you."

The Vicki Barr Flight Stewardess Series

THE SECRET OF MAGNOLIA MANOR

BY HELEN WELLS

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LONDON

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GROSSET & DUNLAP INC., NEW YORK, N.Y., U.S.A.
MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
PURNELL & SONS, LTD., PAULTON (SOM.) AND LONDON

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CHAPTER I

New Orleans

VICKI SAT UP STRAIGHTER IN HER SEAT AND LOOKED OUT the small window. Below her, a beautiful city rose closer and closer as the plane glided down at a steep, swift angle.

"New Orleans," she thought, her soft blue eyes wide with excitement, "the most romantic city in the whole country!"

The plane hit the ground with a slight bounce and Vicki's blonde head bobbed. They rolled along one of the runways of the busy airport and came smoothly to a stop.

Vicki unbuckled her safety belt, grabbed her suitcase, and followed the other passengers down the aisle. Marion Delbeau, the stewardess on this flight, exchanged professional grins with her as Vicki paused for a moment in the doorway.

"Well, stewardess," Marion said, "how did it feel to ride as a passenger?"

"Luxurious," Vicki laughed. "But tomorrow I'll be out here bright and early in uniform. We take off for Guatemala City at eight-fifty. Will I be seeing you around the airport?"

"No," Marion said. "We leave for New York tomorrow morning at seven-thirty on the nose." As she ushered out her passengers, she added, "I have

Thursday off. If you're free, too, give me a ring at the Roosevelt Hotel."

Vicki nodded and hurried down the steps in the dazzling noon sunshine. She almost tripped into the arms of Captain Tom Jordan, fortyish, fatherly, and substantial as an oak tree. Captain Jordan was pilot and commander of Vicki's crew of three, which formerly had included Dean Fletcher, co-pilot. But Dean had recently been promoted by Federal Airlines and was now a commander.

Vicki missed Dean, but she couldn't help looking forward to meeting her new co-pilot. Captain Jordan whacked her affectionately on the shoulder and shook her hand as enthusiastically as though they had not seen each other for a month, instead of just last week at the Federal Airlines office in New York.

"Vic!" He grinned down at her and said over his shoulder to the tall, tanned young man who was standing behind him, "I warned you, Dusty. Silly-looking hats, even sillier, high-heeled shoes, but don't let appearances deceive you." He pretended to be very formal as he introduced the two young members of his crew. "Miss Victoria Barr of Fairview, Illinois, may I present our new co-pilot Mr. Beauregard Jackson Miles of New Orleans, Louisiana? We call him Dusty."

Vicki and Dusty solemnly shook hands, but there was a mischievous twinkle in Dusty's dark-blue eyes as they wandered from Vicki's frivolous new bonnet to the tips of her open-toed sandals.

"I like silly-looking hats, cap'n," he said to the pilot. "Especially when they're slightly askew."

Vicki's hands flew to her hat and her small face flushed.

"That's the way it's supposed to be," she said, tossing her ash-blonde hair. "It isn't on straight unless it's put on crooked." She added with a giggle, "If you know what I mean."

Dusty's grin broadened and he picked up Vicki's suitcase. "It doesn't make sense to me, but on you it looks swell. Anyway, welcome to the Crescent City, Miss Illinois. I'm detailed to drive you to your hotel in my ancient but honourable roadster. Cap'n thought you should be escorted to the heart of our fair city by a native son."

Vicki glanced at the pilot's grease-stained overalls. "That's awfully nice of you, but aren't you two busy?"

"We are," Captain Jordan said, "but it's only a few miles to town." He moved away toward a hangar. "Don't forget to report in. See you in the morning, Vic. Around eight, eh?"

Vicki smiled good-bye and trotted along beside Dusty, trying to keep up with his long strides as he led the way to the office of the Assistant Superintendent of Flight Stewardesses. After reporting to that pleasant young woman, Vicki followed Dusty to his car. She climbed in and parked her small feet on the suitcase he had placed on the floor.

"Whew," Vicki sighed. "Is it always this warm so early in March?"

Dusty turned on the ignition. "Spring comes early to this semi-tropical neck of the woods, Vicki." He smoothed his dark, wavy hair back from his forehead and asked, "Where to? Are you stopping at the Roosevelt? Marion Delbeau and some of the other stewardesses are."

"I'm staying in a pension," Vicki said triumphantly. "One of Mother's friends back home—Mrs. Landry—wangled me an invitation. It's in the old French Quarter." Gingerly she tried out her French accent. It had a distinct and embarrassing twang of Illinois in it. "In the Vieux Carré, I guess you'd say. Oh, dear, my Spanish is much better than my French."

"Your Spanish is going to come in handy," Dusty said as they started off for town. "Not only in New Orleans, but in Guatemala City."

Vicki nodded. She was looking forward to their every-other-day hop across the Gulf of Mexico into Central America, stopping en route at Merida, Mexico. They would stay overnight in Guatemala City before the return flight the following afternoon. Vicki's last assignment had taken her to Mexico and it would be fun visiting exotic Latin America again, but right now she was more interested in seeing the fascinating city of New Orleans.

"I've been reading up on the history of your home town," she told Dusty. "And I can't wait to see all the interesting places, especially the romantic French Quarter."

"I grew up in the Vieux Carré," Dusty said. "Dad and Mother bought an old tumble-down Creole mansion and remodelled it when I was just a kid." He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "Maybe we're neighbours. What pension are you staying at?"

"The Pension Breaux," Vicki said and gave him the address. "Mrs. Landry says it's around the corner from Pirate's Alley and only a stone's throw from the Cathedral of St. Louis. Do you know where it is?"

"I should say I do," Dusty said with a laugh. "And I've known the Breaux family most of my life. I guess you know that your host, Mr. Paul Breaux, has a niece whom he keeps practically under glass in the true old Creole tradition?"

Vicki laughed. "I knew I must think of him as my host even though I'll be a paying guest, and that he had a teen-age niece named Marie. But I didn't know he kept her under glass. Why does he, Dusty?"

Dusty shrugged his broad shoulders. "A real honest-to-goodness Creole isn't like anybody else in the world. They're descendants of the original French colonists, you know, and the old-timers, like Marie's uncle Paul, feel that young ladies should be brought up as conventionally as they were in the eighteenth century." He gave her a swift teasing glance. "*You* don't look as though you'd been brought up under glass. It'll do timid little Marie a lot of good to have someone like you staying in that gloomy house."

Vicki suddenly felt a little nervous. What had her mother's well-meaning friend, Mrs. Landry, let her in for? Traditions and conventions could be more confining than the strictest rules and regulations, and all four of them irked Vicki's venturesome spirit. She had read about the Creoles and how they got their name. When the Spaniards conquered Louisiana they had inter-married with the French settlers. Their children were called Creoles.

Vicki had expected to find the Breaux pension a carefully preserved landmark of Old World French culture, but she had taken it for granted that her host and his niece would be as modern and American as her new co-pilot.

As though reading her mind, Dusty said, "The parents of the kids I grew up with weren't anywhere near as strict as Marie's uncle is. He won't even allow her to leave the pension in broad daylight without a chaperon. And she'll be eighteen a week from tonight. Her aunt is giving her a birthday ball in celebration, to which I've been invited."

Vicki could hardly believe her ears. A girl almost eighteen not allowed to go out unchaperoned in the daytime! Vicki thought of her lively, young-minded mother, and felt a surge of pity for Marie Breaux who, she knew, was an orphan.

"Why, even my twelve-year-old sister, Ginny, has more freedom than that," she told Dusty indignantly. "I don't think I'm going to like Mr. Paul Breaux!"

"Oh, but you will," Dusty assured her. "He's really a charming old gentleman, full of southern hospitality and delightful Creole mannerisms. He's only narrow-minded when it comes to Marie, and you don't have to waste any sympathy on her because I have an idea her engagement is going to be announced at the ball next Friday night."

Dusty was driving more slowly now, for they were in the heart of New Orleans. Vicki, a little disappointed, stared at the tall buildings, the department stores and the heavy traffic. Why, this part of town looked like any other busy American city. And then she noticed that they were driving along an amazingly wide street and that the sidewalks were paved with pink-bordered terrazzo marble.

"Canal Street," Dusty said. "It used to be a moat separating the French Quarter from the rest of the town."

From the docks along the Mississippi River, a few squares away, Vicki heard boat whistles. A ripe fragrance hung on the air: the smell of bananas being loaded at the wharves, and mingling with it was the scent of flowering shrubs—magnolias, oleanders, azaleas, camellias, and roses. Balloon hawkers were everywhere, and so were tiny shops that sold nothing but New Orleans' famous pecan candy, pralines.

Dusty pointed to a windowless building with glass-brick walls on the right-hand side of the bustling thoroughfare. "That's the International Trade Mart," he said. "It's sort of a community show window where foreign and domestic importers and exporters display their wares. I'll take you through it sometime."

"I'd like that," Vicki said.

Dusty turned the car to the left into Decatur Street. "And now," he said, "we're in the French Quarter. I wish I could show you some of the interesting spots, but I haven't time today." He hesitated. "Would you be free this evening, Vicki?"

Vicki laughed. "As free as air, unless Mr. Breaux plans to lock me in an ivory tower with Marie."

Dusty chuckled. "He might try, but I have a feeling he won't get very far. Then it's a date?"

"A date," Vicki said, and decided she was going to like this nice-looking, easy-to-know young man.

And now they were driving along narrow cobblestoned streets and Vicki felt as if she had suddenly been transported to a fairy-tale city. Lacelike wrought-iron balconies formed porches on every floor of the three-storied buildings, and Vicki saw that one of them was surrounded by a cornstalk fence with twining morning-glories. An old Negro woman, wearing a headkerchief and a stiff white apron over her starched dress, was calling, "Callas! Callas!" She held out a basketful of cakes as they drove slowly by.

Turning a corner, they almost collided with a Frenchwoman in a mule-drawn wagon laden with vegetables. She was singing, "Voulez-vous des légumes aujourd'hui? Des bonnes carottes, des pommes de terre?"

"My stars," Vicki gasped. "Is this really the U.S.A.?"

"You haven't seen anything yet," Dusty told her. "Practically every house in the Vieux Carré has a ghost." He laughed. "I've never seen any of 'em, but maybe that's because I'm not a Creole."

"Is Marie's fiancé a Creole?" Vicki asked.

"Absolutely not," Dusty said. "Bill Graham is as New England as Boston baked beans. And that's a funny thing. Since Mr. Breaux has always insisted that Marie be governed by the strictest traditions, you wouldn't think he'd allow her to marry out of the Creole circle. A generation or two ago it was considered a disgrace to la famille if a Creole married a non-Creole." He slowed the car to a stop at the kerb and Vicki said:

"If he's as strict as you say he is, I'm surprised her uncle allowed Marie even to speak to a young man. How did that happen?"

Dusty turned off the ignition and explained. "Bill Graham—who, by the way, is a really swell guy—is a free-lance architect, and he specializes in southern colonial architecture. Last September, Mr. Breaux sold the old family plantation, Magnolia Manor, to a Mr. Carlisle from New York who plans to make it his winter home. He put Bill in charge of the restoration and naturally Bill consulted several times with Marie's uncle. Mr. Carlisle apparently wants the old mansion to look as much as possible as it did in its heyday, and Paul Breaux is the only one who could give Bill advice."

"So that's how Bill and Marie met?" Vicki asked. "And then Bill kept on coming to the pension to see her?"

"That's right," Dusty said with a broad grin. "But poor Bill couldn't do much courting under the watchful eye of Uncle Paul. If it hadn't been for Marie's aunt Julie, the romance wouldn't have got very far. Mrs. Ewing—she's a widow—is a swell sport. She's about Captain Jordan's age and, although she's as plump as a partridge, she's full of pep and crazy about both Marie and Bill. She invites them both to her beautiful home a lot and generally retires to her room for a nap instead of playing chaperon."

"She sounds like a darling person," Vicki said.

"She is—you'll love her." Dusty glanced at his wrist watch and started the car. "Gosh, it's twelve-thirty. This gumbo ya-ya has got to stop."

"Gumbo ya-ya?"

"An old Creole custom." Dusty chuckled as he started the car. "Gossip. It means everybody talking at once. The elderly Creole ladies spend long afternoons together telling each other family secrets. Mme de Fres, the pension's permanent guest, is typical. Wait till you see her! She's still living in the nineteenth century and looks it. She wouldn't stir out after dark because the night air is poisonous, and is horrified when Sarah, the Breaux' cook, throws away onion peels instead of burning them. Burning them, you see, is supposed to bring money to the house. Madame burned a whole bucketful of 'em the week before Mr. Carlisle paid Marie's uncle a fancy sum for Magnolia Manor, and was she ever triumphant!"

Vicki giggled. "I must tell Dad. He fancies himself as a superchef, although he's really a college professor. Drives Mother out of her mind by making a mess of the kitchen. Maybe burning his parings and scrapings is the answer."

"According to Mme de Fres it is," Dusty said. "And whatever caused it, Mr. Breaux was certainly lucky to get rid of a white elephant like Magnolia Manor. Those old, neglected plantations, with their enormous tumbledown mansions, are a dime a dozen around here. Personally, I think Mr. Carlisle made a mistake. You couldn't pay me to spend a winter on the edge of that gloomy swamp, and it's not because of the headless spectre that's supposed to wander around there at midnight either."

"You and your ghosts!" Vicki teased. "I'm beginning to think you actually believe in them."

"Not me!" Dusty parked the roadster in front of a balcony-festooned grey-brick house. "When Bill gets through remodelling Magnolia Manor, it'll be a landmark of ante-bellum southern architecture, with or without a ghost, but he'll never get rid of the dampness unless he drains Dixie Swamp."

Dusty unfolded his long legs and climbed out of the car. He came around to open the door for Vicki and lifted out her suitcase. "Welcome to Pension Breaux," he said.

Vicki stared at the heavy front door and the arched windows overhead. Every pane of glass was tightly, jealously, covered with slatted blinds. "That's why those shutters are called jalousies," Vicki thought, "but I should think the Breaux would raise them on a warm day like this."

There was something forbidding about those covered windows and the thick oaken door. It was as though the old house had closed its eyes to shut out the rest of the world. Feeling like an intruder, Vicki lifted the lion's-head knocker and let it fall.

CHAPTER II

The House with the Closed Eyes

VICKI, STANDING UNCERTAINLY UNDER THE LANTERN over the pension front door, listened for the sound of someone coming in answer to her knock. Would it be Paul Breaux, her host, or his niece Marie?

Dusty answered the question. "I'm not very presentable, so I'll just turn your suitcase over to Sarah, the cook, and scram back to the airport. Sarah's a wonderful old Negress. She pooh-poohs Mme de Fres' superstitions and has no patience when Mr. Breaux makes Marie behave as though she were living in the Dark Ages."

"Marie's got two friends on her side then," Vicki said with a smile. "Sarah and her aunt Julie."

"That's right," Dusty said. "But you mustn't get the idea that Marie thinks her uncle is an ogre. Quite the contrary. She wouldn't think of crossing the street without Uncle Paul's full approval. At least," he finished with a mischievous twinkle in his dark-blue eyes, "she wouldn't until she met Bill. Things may be different now."

"Well, they'll certainly be different after their engagement is announced," Vicki said emphatically. "Uncle Paul can't very well keep her under glass when she's Bill's fiancée."

Dusty shrugged. "It's kind of handy having a niece help Sarah run the pension, you know." He grinned down at Vicki's upturned face. "Mr. Breaux isn't exactly what you'd call energetic."

Vicki heard footsteps on the other side of the door and then a click. The heavy door swung open on its hinges, and on the threshold stood a tall Negro woman in a spotless gingham dress with a bright kerchief tied around her head. Beyond her, Vicki glimpsed a dark passage, and at its end, framed through an archway, a sunlit courtyard where flowers grew in multicoloured profusion.

"Hi, Sarah," Dusty said. "This is Miss Vicki Barr. I'll carry her bag in if you promise not to let anyone see me in these greasy dungarees."

"Go along with you, Mr. Dusty," Sarah said, revealing flashing white teeth as she smiled. "I've fed you cookies in my clean kitchen many a time when your overalls were a sight dirtier than they are now."

She turned to Vicki. "You come right in, honey. M. Breaux is expecting you in the patio. You come in too, Mr. Dusty. It's not polite to stop at a person's home without saying good morning to the master and mistress. Miss Marie is tidying Madame's apartment, but she'll be right down."

Sarah started off briskly and Vicki and Dusty stepped over the high doorsill and followed. The tunnel-like passage, which led from the door to the courtyard, was about fifty feet long and the air in it had a slightly mouldy odour. Vicki sniffed and decided that the house must be one of the oldest in the Vieux Carré.

And then they emerged into the bright sunshine of the patio. Vicki blinked, surprised at the beauty of this secluded garden within a house. Several rocking chairs were placed invitingly in the shade of two leafy magnolia trees and a tall, graceful palm. A fountain splashed in the centre, and the paved walks were bordered with neat beds of bright tropical flowers. The brick walls were covered with ivy, and wisteria climbed around the wrought-iron staircase which led to the lacy balcony above Vicki's head.

It was so lovely here that Vicki caught her breath. And then she saw that a plump little old gentleman was slowly rising from a comfortable-looking chair on the other side of the fountain. Sarah was saying:

"M'sieu, here's your Miss Vicki." She went up the outside staircase with Vicki's bag, crying, "Miss Marie. Miss Marie!"

Mr. Breaux nodded a greeting to Dusty and came forward, hand outstretched, to welcome Vicki. "Bonjour," he said, and the numerous keys at his belt jingled merrily. "So you are the young lady my good friend, Mrs. Landry, wrote me about. I am delighted to have you as my guest." He made Vicki a courtly bow and she saw that his crest of white hair surrounded a pink bald spot on the top of his head. "Please consider my home to be your home."

Vicki smiled, faintly surprised. Mr. Breaux was not at all like the usual hotel keeper. "Thank you," she said. "I know I'll enjoy staying here between flights. I've never seen a home as beautiful and—and—picturesque as this one."

He patted his trim, white moustache, a gesture which made Vicki think of a bright-feathered cock preening in the sunshine. He even walked with a strut, and when he talked he gesticulated with small, well-cared-for hands.

"This has been my family's home for generations," he said, rather pompously, Vicki thought. "But we Creoles, alas, have not kept up with modern commercialism." His round pink face grimaced his distaste. "And so, in order to keep my home, I invite a few guests to share it with me." His pale-blue eyes twinkled at

Vicki. "La pauvreté n'est pas un déshonneur, mais c'est une fichue misère. Do you understand?"

"Poverty isn't a dishonour—a disgrace," Vicki slowly translated. "But it's an awful inconvenience."

"Good, good," Mr. Breaux said approvingly. He turned to the tall young pilot. "I did not know that you and Miss Vicki were acquainted."

Dusty grinned down at the dapper old gentleman. "We weren't until half an hour ago, sir. We're crew mates, you see."

Mr. Breaux shrugged. "I do not understand airplanes. I myself would never fly in one. My sister, Marie's tante, considers me old-fashioned."

Inside the house a clock chimed the quarter hour. "I've got to run along," Dusty said. "Good-bye, Mr. Breaux. See you this evening, Vic."

Mr. Breaux stopped Dusty with an imperious wave of his small, plump hand. "Here it comes," Vicki thought. "He's going to tell me he doesn't approve of young ladies going out unchaperoned."

But the old gentleman was smiling benignly. "You will do us the honour of dining with us this evening, Dusty?" he asked cordially. "We will make it a small celebration in honour of our new guest. I shall invite my sister, Julie, and I have already asked the nice young Bill Graham. He wishes to consult me about a decoration problem out at the plantation house."

"I accept with pleasure, sir," Dusty said. With a reassuring nod to Vicki, he hurried out of the patio and down the corridor.

"My niece will be down soon," Mr. Breaux said. "An orphan, poor child, my brother's daughter. I, an old bachelor, and our good Sarah, reared her from a baby. She and I are the only ones left who bear the name of Breaux."

"And I understand she'll be changing it soon," Vicki said with a smile. "Or is it a secret that Marie is engaged to Bill Graham?"

"No secret at all," Mr. Breaux assured her. "The young man has called upon me and declared his intentions. We shall announce the engagement a week from tonight." He sighed. "I would have liked to keep my little girl with me a little longer, but one cannot stand in the path of young love, can one?"

He glanced upward and Vicki followed his gaze to the balcony on the second floor. At the top of the stairs a slender, dark-haired girl was studying Vicki with shy interest.

"Ah, Marie, there you are!" her uncle cried. "Come down, chérie, and meet our new guest."

"Why, she's as lovely as a flower," Vicki thought as the young girl came gracefully down the steps. Her skin was magnolia-white and made her thickly curling hair seem even darker than it was. One tiny hand slid along the iron railing and her small feet seemed to skim down the staircase. She came across the patio to stand demurely beside her uncle with an air of old-fashioned obedience as he introduced the two girls.

"I hope you will be very happy here," Marie said to Vicki, and a charming smile lighted the delicate features of her beautiful oval face.

"I know I will," Vicki said, returning the smile.

Marie pinched the ruffles of her full white skirt. "Uncle Paul says you fly everywhere. You must meet all sorts of interesting people. I can't imagine such a thing. Why, I hardly stir from the pension."

Mr. Breaux patted her smooth, bare arm affectionately. "It is only for your own protection, chérie. You find that very strict, eh, Miss Vicki?"

Vicki, remembering her harum-scarum sister, Ginny, merely laughed. There was no sense in bluntly telling her host that she *did* think he was very strict.

"Did you and Sarah attend to the marketing?" Mr. Breaux was asking his niece.

"Yes, Uncle Paul," Marie replied, and added rather nervously, "But we forgot the shrimps. I am so terribly sorry, Uncle Paul. But don't you think for once we could have the gumbo with just oysters and crabs?"

Mr. Breaux's small pink face turned red for a minute. "A gumbo without shrimp? How can you think of such a thing!" He smoothed his face back into a smile and said to Vicki, "I am a gourmet. I would rather not eat at all if things are not prepared as they should be."

Vicki couldn't help thinking with inner amusement that he looked as though he ate more than he should whether the food suited his exacting taste or not.

Marie said again, her eyes downcast, "I am so terribly sorry, Uncle Paul. I myself shall wash the luncheon dishes so Sarah can go again to the market and bring back the shrimps for dinner."

"That is as it should be," her uncle said with a chuckle. "Let the punishment fit the crime. Now run along, chérie, and show our new guest to her room. I trust you finished the accounts before you left the pension this morning?"

"Yes, I did, Uncle Paul," Marie said quickly. "And I did not forget Madame's herb tea."

The little old gentleman, all smiles again, turned to Vicki. "You see what an angel she is? I shall miss her very much when she becomes Mrs. William Graham and goes North to live."

"I'm sure you will," Vicki said a trifle tartly, and wondered what Mr. Breaux contributed to the running of the household.

He glanced at her shrewdly. "You work hard too, n'est-ce pas, Miss Vicki? It keeps a young girl out of mischief. As for me, I keep myself busy. I handle the mail and I answer all telephone calls." He plucked a flower and tucked it in his buttonhole. "I preside at table, and I entertain our friends here under the trees." Vicki did her best not to show what she thought: that Uncle Paul was none too fond of work.

"Please excuse us now, Uncle Paul," Marie was saying meekly. "Miss Barr has just time to wash before lunch."

He dismissed them both with an airy wave of his plump hands. As Vicki followed Marie up the wrought-iron staircase, she said, "Please call me Vicki. And may I call you Marie?"

The lovely young girl stopped at the top of the stairs and turned to face Vicki with a disarming smile. "How nice and friendly you are! I feel as though I had known you for a long time. Sarah tells me that Dusty Miles brought you to the pension. I did not know that you two were friends. I like Dusty very much. He is going to try to come to my party a week from tonight. I shall ask my tante Julie to arrange that he come as your escort."

"Oh, don't, please," Vicki begged, flushing with embarrassment. "I'd love to come to your party, but Dusty and I only met this morning. He may not want to come with me."

Marie laughed. "Here in New Orleans it is always arranged like that. When the young men are invited to a ball they are given the name of the girl they are expected to escort. Dusty was not sure that he would be in town next Friday night, so he has no date." She dimpled, her dark eyes twinkling. "I can assure you, Vicki, he will be pleased with the arrangement. You are very attractive—much prettier than any of the other girls who are coming to my party."

Vicki's cheeks flamed at this compliment. "You're just about the loveliest girl I ever saw, Marie," she said. "Bill Graham is a lucky man."

It was Marie's turn to blush. "So you know that we are almost engaged?"

Vicki nodded. "Dusty told me. He thinks Bill is terribly nice."

Marie, a little timidly, tucked her arm through Vicki's. "He's the most wonderful man in the whole world," she half whispered. "I am told that he is doing a beautiful job out at the plantation house. It has not been lived in, you see, since my great-uncle Etienne died when I was just a baby. The wallpaper had all peeled away and the beautiful old furniture was covered with mould. And already, although only the upstairs rooms are finished, they say it is beginning to look like a great mansion again." She opened a door. "Here is your room. It is right next to mine."

Vicki stared inside and gasped. The enormous four-poster bed, with a ruffled tester, was big enough for half a dozen Vickis. A huge armoire or wardrobe stood in one corner, and the chairs and soft velvet rug were spattered with gay, tiny flowers so that the whole room seemed to reflect the garden below the balcony.

"What a beautiful room," Vicki cried.

Marie glowed with pride. "I'll show you around the whole house after lunch. But now let me help you unpack, and we must hurry."

Vicki's suitcase was already placed on a luggage rack near one of the tall, blind-covered windows that faced the street. Together the girls hastily hung up Vicki's dresses and uniforms and then a bell tinkled.

"That's Sarah calling us to lunch," Marie said. "Hurry and wash. Uncle Paul doesn't like people to be late to meals." She pointed to a washstand in a corner.

Vicki scrubbed at top speed and ran a comb through her silvery-blonde hair while Marie nervously pleated the ruffles of her skirt. "I'm sorry you have to rush so," she said in a low voice, "but Uncle Paul will blame me if you are late. And he is already cross with me for forgetting the shrimps, you know."

Vicki thought with surprise, "Why, she's really afraid of her uncle! He seemed more like a kewpie doll than an ogre to me, but maybe he's not always as good-natured as he looks."

A wave of sympathy for Marie swept over Vicki as she thought of her own informal home where no one was scolded for forgetting things or for being late to meals, which were as often as not delayed by her father's amateur cooking.

Downstairs, in the quiet, high-ceilinged dining-room, Vicki discovered at once that mealtime at the pension was a ceremony. Upon their entrance, Uncle Paul, at the head of the polished table, had risen stiffly from a monumental armchair for which he was entirely too small. Opposite him sat the pension's permanent guest, Mme de Fres, a wisp of a Creole lady of venerable age. She wore a black alpaca dress that came down to her ankles, a cameo brooch at her throat, and her thin white hair was twisted into a knot on the top of her head.

Uncle Paul explained that Madame spoke only French as he introduced Vicki to her and waved the two girls to their chairs.

The frail little lady smiled at Vicki and said something in her whispery old voice which Vicki couldn't understand. Vicki smiled back and stammered, "Bonjour, madame."

Sarah came in through the swinging door to the kitchen, bearing a huge silver platter. On it were individual dishes of baked oysters covered with something which smelled delicious but which looked more like hot, bubbling seaweed than a sauce to Vicki.

"Oysters Rockefeller, my dear," Uncle Paul said as he began to serve, the keys at his waist jingling. "A famous New Orleans dish, but not as Creole as the gumbo you shall have tonight."

After one taste Vicki decided to get the recipe from Marie to send home to her father.

"I'll write it down for you after lunch," Marie promised. "But now tell us about yourself, Vicki, your family and your home. I am so interested; I have never been out of New Orleans."

So Vicki briefly described her professor father, her lively mother whose passion was horseback riding, and her little sister, Ginny, who was just entering her teens, complete with temporary glasses, temporary orthopedic oxfords, braces, and a stolid forbearance. As Vicki spoke, Mr. Breaux translated for Mme de Fres, who nodded and smiled and pecked at her food, and every now and then asked a question in rapid French.

"Our house is very different from yours," Vicki told Marie. She realized that Uncle Paul and Mme de Fres thought of her as an alien from Illinois and wanted to make them all see her small town and her house with the lake behind it at the foot of the hill. "Fairview is a middle-sized town in the corn-and-wheat country," she said. "Everyone calls our house The Castle because of its tower and sloping red roof. It was left to us by a cousin and was a rather run-down, gloomy place when we first moved into it. But now it's so lovely people are always driving out from Fairview to admire it."

Uncle Paul had been listening with courtesy, although Vicki suspected that his real attention was on the dishes Sarah was bringing in. "Every man's home is his castle," he said, "and it is too bad when one is forced to sell a house that has been in one family for many generations. I did not like to part with Magnolia Manor, the Breaux plantation, but I could not afford to keep it. For many years I have been forced to sell a piece of furniture every time the taxes were due."

Marie's dark eyes widened with surprise. "Why, Uncle Paul," she cried, "I didn't know you felt that way about Magnolia Manor. I thought you were glad to get rid of it, and for such an unexpectedly large sum of money!"

Anger flickered in and out of the old gentleman's pale eyes, and Vicki guessed that Marie was right. Uncle Paul was showing off in the presence of a Northerner and pretending a sentiment he did not feel. Vicki said quickly to relieve the tension:

"Speaking of money makes me think of Ginny. My kid sister has gone into business with Cookie Walker, who's in her class at school."

Instantly Mr. Breaux's good humour returned. "Surely you are joking, Miss Vicki? A child of twelve in business!"

Vicki laughed. "She decided that if Dad could cook, so could she, but the only thing she can make is fudge. So she and her partner, Cookie, are pestering everybody in town for orders for their homemade, super-special, delicious fudge."

"Why, I think that's a wonderful idea!" Marie exclaimed. "I might even go into the praline business myself. Bill says my pecan candy is the best in town."

"Marie!" Mr. Breaux almost shouted his disapproval. "Imagine a young Creole lady selling candy like a street vendor."

"I was only joking, Uncle Paul," Marie said hastily. "But couldn't we order some of little Ginny's fudge?"

"Of course, of course," Uncle Paul boomed heartily. "Can that be arranged, Miss Vicki?"

"We—ell," Vicki said cautiously. "I can't guarantee how good it really is. But Ginny and Cookie will be delighted to handle mail orders. When I was home about ten days ago on rest leave, before I reported to New York to receive this assignment, they had sold only two boxes. One to Mother and Dad, and one to Mr. and Mrs. Walker. They were a bit discouraged."

"My tante Julie will order several boxes for the party next week," Marie said with a smile. "She loves candy and tries so hard not to eat sweets because she is really getting to be a little too plump. At least *she* thinks so. I think she's perfect the way she is. You'll love her, Vicki."

"I've asked your aunt to dine with us this evening, Marie," Mr. Breaux said. "And also Bill Graham and Dusty Miles. We'll have a little party in honour of Miss Vicki here."

Marie's lovely face was flushed with animation. "How wonderful, Uncle Paul, and how very kind and thoughtful of you."

Mr. Breaux patted his moustache with his snowy linen napkin, preening, but Sarah took the wind out of his sails with a loud sniff.

"It's about time we began filling this gloomy house with young people," she muttered as she cleared the table. "And as for Miss Marie washing the luncheon dishes, I will not permit it, m'sieu, and it is not necessary that I go to the market again. That young Cajun boy we often deal with, just now brought a basket of fresh shrimp to the back door."

"Good, good," Mr. Breaux said jovially as he pushed back his chair, signalling that luncheon was over. "Our petite Marie must keep her hands pretty for the birthday ball, eh?"

Marie jumped up and impulsively threw her arms around her uncle. "Then you have forgiven me for my forgetfulness, Uncle Paul?"

"Of course, of course, chérie," the old gentleman said genially. "But the gumbo you must prepare yourself. Our good Sarah puts in too much celery and not enough garlic and thyme."

"I must get that recipe for Dad too," Vicki said as she and Marie followed Mme de Fres and Mr. Breaux through the French doors into the sunlit patio. "Maybe you'd let me watch and help. I can slice onions without weeping. Dad taught me that holding a crust of bread in your mouth makes all the difference."

"It does." Marie nodded. "But you must not spend the afternoon in our hot kitchen. We will have café au lait; then I will show you the other rooms in the house and after that you must take a nap."

They drank their coffee in the garden, and Mr. Breaux and Madame conversed in fluent, rapid French over demitasse after demitasse. Listening to their gumbo ya-ya, mingling with the murmur of the fountain and the rustling of the leaves, made Vicki very sleepy. She yawned several times as Marie led her through the lovely old house which gave many evidences of its once splendid past. The walls of plain white plaster had fine cornices and in almost every room were carved marble fireplaces. Crystal chandeliers hung from the high ceilings, and everywhere were delicate porcelains, old rosewood furniture, and fading family portraits.

Outside a pair of folding doors Marie stopped. "This is the best parlour," she said, "and it is always kept locked. It occupies the ground-floor space beneath both of our rooms, and it is so beautiful I want you to see it sometime."

"Why is it locked?" Vicki said with drowsy interest. "Our tan-and-white spaniel, Freckles, would have a fit if he couldn't race in and out of our parlour."

Marie looked a little shocked. "Our most prized family heirlooms are kept in there, and it is an old Creole tradition that the best parlour is always kept locked. Uncle Paul keeps the key on that big ring he wears on his belt." Her voice grew soft. "Once when I was about the age of your sister, Ginny, I asked him to have a duplicate made so I could go in and see my mother's portrait whenever I wanted to."

"I don't blame you," Vicki cried, thinking that it must be very hard to have no mother. "And did he?"

"Oh, no," Marie said, her lips smiling, but her eyes sorrowful at the memory. "And I was very naughty and burst into tears. I couldn't stop crying and finally Uncle Paul had to send for my tante. But even she couldn't persuade him to let me have a key of my own."

Vicki bit her lip impatiently. "I think that was very mean of him, though he looks like an old darling."

Marie laughed. "He *is* an old darling and I love him very much. Both of my parents died in a flu epidemic when I was only a few months old and I've lived with Uncle Paul ever since." She led the way up the inside staircase to Vicki's room.

Vicki tiredly unstrapped her high-heeled sandals and kicked them off. She curled up on the huge bed and invited Marie to sit beside her. "It's none of my business," she said with a smile, "but I can't help wondering why your aunt didn't bring you up, Marie, instead of your bachelor uncle."

Marie shook her head. "My tante was in Europe on her honeymoon when my mother and father died. And in my father's will he appointed Uncle Paul as my guardian. I think when Tante Julie came back to New Orleans she did want to adopt me, but the law is very strict about guardians." She shrugged her slim shoulders. "But it doesn't matter. Both my uncle and aunt are very good to me. You mustn't think Uncle Paul is too strict, Vicki. He is very proud of our city and the part our family played in the founding of it. If the Creoles had not kept the old customs and traditions alive, the Vieux Carré would have lost most of its great charm." She jumped up hastily. "I must go help Sarah with dinner. We'll use our best Limoges china in honour of your arrival." Then with a fleeting smile she was gone.

Vicki stretched out on the bed and stared at the shuttered windows. "Marie *thinks* she's happy," she decided just before she began to doze, "but *I* don't think she is. I'm glad she's going to get married soon and leave this house with its locked parlour and jalousie blinds. Marie may love her uncle Paul, but I think he was very cruel to lock up her mother's portrait in that big room downstairs."

CHAPTER III

A Stormy Scene

VICKI NAPPED FOR AN HOUR OR SO, THEN FINISHED UNpacking and arranging things so that the big room gradually began to look as though she belonged in it. She covered the marble top of the huge dresser with her toilet articles and pictures of her family.

Then Sarah tapped on the door and handed Vicki several Creole recipes which Marie had neatly typed on what must have been a very old machine. When Vicki copied them in a letter to her father she could hardly distinguish the "h's" from the "n's" and the letter "b" was so badly out of alignment it hardly showed up at all. In a note to her mother Vicki added a postscript to Ginny telling her to send a box of fudge to Marie and her uncle Paul. Then she showered and slipped into a gay print frock with a long, full skirt.

She heard a rustle on the balcony side of the French doors and looked through to see Marie standing there in a lovely gown of fine eyelet embroidery over baby-blue taffeta. Marie had tied a wide blue ribbon around her thick, curly hair and wore flat-heeled white satin ballet slippers on her tiny feet.

Vicki thought she had never seen anyone look more exquisite, and, as they came down the outside staircase to the garden below, Uncle Paul complimented them both.

"You make a fine bouquet, mes belles," he said with a courtly bow.

Sitting on the other side of the bubbling fountain was a plump little lady whom Marie hugged and kissed as though she had not seen her in months.

"This is Tante Julie," she told Vicki proudly. "Isn't she the most beautiful lady in the whole wide world?"

Mrs. Ewing, Vicki decided, must have been a celebrated beauty when she was Marie's age and she was now a very handsome woman indeed. Her thick hair was as black and curly as her niece's, her skin as smooth and white as a gardenia, and her enormous dark eyes flashed as she smiled a greeting to Vicki.

"Pay no attention to my petite Marie's flattery, Mlle Barr," she cried, extending both of her beringed hands. "Come closer, chérie, and stand beside my niece. Ah," she sighed with satisfaction, "you two do, as my brother said, make a fine bouquet. One so dark and the other so fair. In my day the beaus would have swarmed around you as thick as bees on a honeysuckle vine."

"Come, come, Julie," Uncle Paul interrupted with mild disapproval, "you will turn the young ladies' heads with your flattery."

Mrs. Ewing glared at her brother. "Why must you be such a stuffy old bachelor, Paul? Ma foi! If it were not for me, you would have made a Cinderella of our little niece." She shook a plump finger at him. "After the ball next Friday night, things are going to be changed." She turned back to Vicki. "We hope to have the pleasure of your company that evening, mademoiselle. I have already arranged it. That mischievous scamp, Dusty Miles, my good neighbours' son, shall escort you."

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Ewing," Vicki said. "I'd love to come to your party, but unless our schedule is changed I'm afraid both Dusty and I will be in Guatemala City that evening." She counted on her fingers, explaining about her crew's every-other-day flight into Latin America. "We take off tomorrow morning at eight-fifty, returning to New Orleans at eight, Sunday evening." She heard the sound of the front-door knocker and Sarah's footsteps hurrying down the passageway. "So you see, Mrs. Ewing," she finished, "that means we'll be in Guatemala Monday, Wednesday and Friday nights next week."

Marie's aunt placidly rocked back and forth. "I am crossing my fingers so that your schedule will be changed," she said.

"So am I!" It was Dusty looming in the doorway to the courtyard. He smiled a greeting that included everyone and said to Vicki, "If we're grounded one day on account of the weather, we'll be in town next Friday." He grinned broadly as he shook hands with Marie's aunt and uncle. "I was followed home by a cat last night. That's sure to bring us good luck, isn't it, Aunt Julie?"

Mrs. Ewing chuckled merrily. "Are we all to become superstitious idiots since Mme de Fres burned those onion peels?" Jokingly she confided to Vicki, "Actually, I am ready to believe anything since Paul was fortunate enough to rid himself of the family white elephant, Magnolia Manor. Marie has told you of the sale of our old plantation?"

Vicki nodded. "It sounds like a lovely place."

"It is now," Mrs. Ewing admitted. "That clever Bill Graham has done wonders. I would never have believed anyone could restore that long-neglected mansion to its former splendour. My brother Paul is such a fainéant he would not lift a finger to keep the place up after our uncle Etienne's death."

"Fainéant?" Vicki repeated, not understanding.

It was Uncle Paul himself who translated good-naturedly, almost smugly, Vicki thought. "A gentleman loafer. My sister would have had me work in the rice bottoms and the cotton fields." He shrugged. "Quelle idée!"

The knocker sounded again and this time Sarah admitted a stocky young man with a thick crop of unruly red hair. Marie fairly flew across the courtyard to greet him and proudly introduce him to Vicki. "Miss Barr, may I present Mr. Graham? But please call each other Vicki and Bill, won't you?"

"Hi, Vicki."

"Hello, Bill."

Bill had just time to shake hands all around when the dinner bell tinkled. Mrs. Ewing emerged from her rocker with some difficulty and said, panting, "Give me your arm, brother Paul. I take it, Madame is dining in her apartment?"

Uncle Paul nodded. "She felt quite fatigued after lunch. That one eats too much."

Mrs. Ewing's plump body shook with laughter. "Look at the pot who is calling the kettle black! Someday, mon frère, you are going to turn into a pig if you do not stop stuffing yourself. Wait and see."

Uncle Paul joined in her laughter, and together they led the way into the dining-room where the crystal chandeliers reflected a myriad candle flames and the heavy old silver gleamed.

With a gallant bow Uncle Paul indicated that Vicki, the guest of honour, was to sit on his right. "Marie shall sit on my left, nearest my heart," he said.

Dusty pulled back Vicki's chair and sat on her other side. "Now *you're* nearest *my* heart," he said with a mischievous chuckle.

Bill grinned across the table at Vicki. "I hear you're a flight stewardess. Did Dusty tell you that the Moisant airport was built up from a morass by pumping the lake bottom in behind a concrete sea wall?"

Dusty pretended to groan. "There he goes again. Bill can't get off the subject of our fair city's drainage problems for very long, can he, Marie?"

"It's part of his job," Marie said in Bill's defence, and added to Vicki, "New Orleans, you see, is only one foot above sea level and several feet below the high-water level of the Mississippi. Only its levees, which serve the same purpose as the Holland dikes, keep it from being washed away by the river."

"All very true," Uncle Paul put in, "but what has that got to do will Bill's job?"

"It's this way, sir," Bill said. "I'm not concerned with the drainage problems of the city proper, but I am with the creeks, or as you Orleanians call them, the bayous that interlace Dixie Swamp."

Uncle Paul raised his trim white eyebrows. "And why, may I ask?"

Bill stared down at his plate for a minute. "Well," he began, "Mr. Carlisle—that is, *Mrs.* Carlisle—felt that the marshy land around the house should be drained. They camped out at Magnolia Manor during that Mardi Gras, you know, and Mrs. Carlisle came to the conclusion that the mansion would be much too damp for comfort during the winter months."

"I must say I agree with her," Aunt Julie said as she served the steaming, fragrant gumbo. "I'm sure Uncle Etienne must have suffered frightfully from rheumatism."

"Ridiculous, ridiculous," her brother interrupted. "Our uncle was as spry as a chipmunk until the day he drowned. In fact, much too spry. Nobody but a

Cajun should attempt to paddle a pirogue through the bayous after a heavy rain, and certainly not a man of Uncle Etienne's age."

"I wouldn't attempt it myself, even during a drought," Bill agreed heartily.

"Please interpret for poor me," Vicki begged Marie. "Cajuns, bayous and pirogues. What *are* they talking about?"

"The word 'Cajun,'" Marie said with a smile, "is from Acadian. You remember in Longfellow's poem how Evangeline was separated from her lover, Gabriel, when the British drove the French settlers out of Nova Scotia?"

"Vaguely," Vicki admitted ruefully. "All I really remember is the first line. 'This is the forest primeval.'"

Dusty laughed. "That's all anybody remembers until he comes to Louisiana. You see, some of those exiles wandered down the St. Lawrence and then the Mississippi. Their descendants are our Cajuns."

"They're fascinating people," Aunt Julie added. "They're just as patrician, but much humbler than we Creoles."

"Not at all, not at all," Uncle Paul objected. "They're a shiftless lot, Miss Vicki. Why, they live in shacks right on the bayous and they don't even wear shoes when they come to town to sell their fish and game."

"They're not nearly as shiftless as you are, mon frère," Mrs. Ewing said tartly. "They're wonderful hunters and fishermen and their wives can cook as well as the world's best chefs." Her black eyes snapped as she told Vicki, "You will see them when Dusty takes you to the French Market for coffee and doughnuts later this evening. Then you will notice their chiselled features and exquisite bone structure. My lazy brother is such a snob he does not notice such things."

Uncle Paul took this criticism good-naturedly. "I have the greatest admiration for our Cajuns," he said, passing his plate for a second helping of the rich gumbo. "They skim over the water as swiftly as birds, in their frail shells which are hewn out of a single log. Only a Cajun can handle a pirogue properly." He turned back to Bill. "And what will Mr. Carlisle do with the Cajuns when he drains Dixie Swamp?"

"He has given up all idea of draining the swamp, sir," Bill said. "It would be much too expensive a proposition."

"Now, that's too bad," Mr. Breaux said, and Vicki thought she detected a note of insincerity in his voice. "But when you finish the restoration of Magnolia Manor, Mrs. Carlisle will be so impressed by its beauty she will forget about the dampness."

"I'm afraid not," Bill said. "She suffers badly from arthritis, so Mr. Carlisle has decided to purchase a winter home in Florida."

"What a pity," Aunt Julie sighed. "Then the old mansion will be tenantless again, for the new owner has small chance of selling it." Her black eyes twinkled at Bill. "I do not mean that you haven't made it a thing of beauty, but only a very rich person can afford the large staff of servants necessary to run such a big house."

"Mr. Carlisle fully realizes that," Bill told her, "so he plans to convert it into a swanky night club."

Mr. Breaux dropped his fork with a clatter. "Convert?" His pink face turned pale for a second. "Exactly what do you mean by that?"

"Why, nothing much, sir," Bill said mildly. "The only change in the original plans will be on the ground floor. My boss plans to have one long dining-room which will run the whole length of the house on the west side." He sketched lightly on the tablecloth with his dessert spoon. "There'll be a solid row of French doors opening onto the wide veranda where tables will be set up on nice evenings. I think it's a swell idea, don't you?"

Uncle Paul seemed to have momentarily lost his voice. His face turned white, then crimson, and his small hand shook as he reached for a glass of water. Vicki stared at him in amazement, thinking he might be having some sort of stroke. Everybody else at the table was looking at Bill's sketch.

"A truly wonderful idea," Aunt Julie exclaimed, and Marie cried:

"Oh, Bill, you are so clever! Magnolia Manor will become the most fashionable night club in Louisiana."

And then her uncle found his voice. "Night club, indeed!" He banged on the table with both fists. "I will not allow the home of my ancestors to be so desecrated and for such a purpose. It would be a déshonneur to la famille."

Bill's bright green eyes widened in surprise. "But, Mr. Breaux, it will be a very fine restaurant. And the only change will be the tearing down of the wall between the old parlour and the library. It's lucky for Mr. Carlisle that we had not yet started to redecorate those two rooms."

Mr. Breaux's voice came out in a hiss, "That wall is not to be touched. Do you understand?"

Aunt Julie shook with silent laughter. "Do not make a complete fool of yourself, Paul. You forget that Magnolia Manor no longer belongs to you. If Mr. Carlisle wishes to establish a night club and tear down all the walls, he is perfectly free to do so."

Her brother glared at her through narrowed eyes. "You have no sentiment, Julie, and you should be ashamed of yourself. I, for one, cannot endure the thought of vulgar people dancing in the room that was once the traditionally locked parlour, which even I, as a boy, was only permitted to see on state occasions."

Mrs. Ewing tossed her head. "It is you who should be ashamed of yourself for talking such foolishness. Before the Civil War, when the South was in its heyday, that stuffy old parlour rang with laughter and young people danced there by candlelight until dawn." She leaned forward to shake a plump finger at her brother. "Furthermore, I am not at all sure but that in those days the parlour did run the full length of the house. Now that I think of it, I'm quite sure that Uncle Etienne, who entertained very seldom, walled off the southeast corner to make a library. And very sensible of him too. All of our parlours are much too large. It takes two maids an entire morning to dust mine."

"You don't know what you're talking about," her brother roared. "Adrian and I spent many summers at the plantation when you were too small to leave home. I know for a fact that the house was originally built with the parlour as it is now. And I would never have sold our old family mansion if it had not been clearly understood that the architecture would not be changed."

Completely undaunted by her brother's anger, Aunt Julie said airily, "Then you are more of a fool than I thought you were. You were very fortunate to sell the place at all after stupidly allowing it to lie neglected for so many years."

"I must say I agree with Mrs. Ewing, sir," Dusty said quietly, hoping to placate the irate old gentleman. "No matter what the new owner does to Magnolia Manor it is surely an improvement. In a few more years the old house—*and* the parlour—would have been beyond repair."

"Mind your own business," Mr. Breaux snapped and again turned on Bill, his rage almost beyond control now. "Your employer and I had a gentleman's agreement which I order you not to violate. *The parlour wall is not to be touched* "

Marie, pale and shaken, laid her hand lightly on Bill's as though to prevent him from making an angry retort. She said something which Vicki could not hear, and Bill, obviously controlling himself with an effort for Marie's sake, said stolidly:

"I'm very sorry, sir. I can only take orders from my boss, and Mr. Carlisle has already approved the plan for the new dining-room."

Uncle Paul kicked back his armchair and rose from the table. "You are a stubborn young red-head," he shouted, and added in a menacing undertone, "If you cared anything about the Breaux family and its traditions you would draw up another plan for an equally suitable dining-room which would satisfy Mr. Carlisle and leave the old parlour intact."

Marie, now very pale, slipped out of her chair. Her taffeta underskirt rustled as she hurried around to the head of the table. "Please, Uncle Paul, do not blame Bill. It's not his fault——"

But the little old gentleman ignored her and marched out of the room. In another second Vicki heard the heavy front door of the pension slam. Marie stood there, swaying, and Vicki jumped up to put her arm protectively around the girl's slender shoulders.

Bill, apparently stunned by the whole tempestuous scene, could only stare across the table at Dusty, who, equally baffled, stared back. It was Aunt Julie who broke the heavy silence with a burst of laughter.

"It all comes from stuffing on oysters and shrimp and crabs," she puffed, rising slowly to her feet. "Don't you fret, little Marie. A walk on the levee will reduce your uncle's blood pressure. He'll come back as meek as a lamb. Just wait and see."

But Vicki suspected that Aunt Julie was only trying to dispel the gloom that hung like a black veil over the party that had started out so pleasantly.

CHAPTER IV

Strange Happenings at Night

AUNT JULIE, CLUCKING SOOTHINGLY LIKE A MOTHER hen, led the young people into the courtyard where dusk was beginning to dim the brightness of the flowers and shrubs.

"That Paul," she puffed, settling herself and her voluminous skirt into a comfortable rocker, "he is a strange mixture of the old and the new, and very often his actions do not make sense, Miss Barr——"

"Please call me Vicki, Mrs. Ewing."

"Vicki then, but you must call me Aunt Julie or Tante Julie as Marie does, chérie." Sarah placed a tray bearing a silver coffee urn and tiny fragile cups and saucers on a table near the brisk little lady. As she poured demitasses, she said, "Now I ask you, Vicki, if my brother felt as sentimental about the old family plantation as he would have us believe, would he have sold it to a Northerner?"

"It doesn't seem likely," Vicki admitted.

Dusty and Bill passed the demitasses to the two girls and they filled them to the brim with creamy milk. Aunt Julie did not dilute hers but added several lumps of sugar and stirred vigorously as she talked.

"Whenever it suits his purposes that brother of mine becomes very Creole, but when it comes to money matters he has no sentiments at all. Every year he has sold a piece of the Magnolia Manor furniture in order to pay the taxes. It strikes me that if he really cared about the family heirlooms he would have raised the money for the taxes in some other way."

"That old mansion must have been crammed with antiques," Bill said, and explained to Vicki: "My boss bought the place lock, stock, and barrel, you know, and it's still adequately furnished, although I imagine Mr. Breaux had already sold the most valuable pieces. However, Mr. Carlisle probably will get a good price when he sells the books that line the wall on the library side." He frowned ruefully at Marie. "It never occurred to me that your uncle would kick up such a fuss about that wall."

Marie, still very pale, murmured, "I simply do not understand it, and oh, Bill, it worries me. He left the house so very cross with you!"

Bill shrugged. "I'm sorry I can't draw up another plan as he suggested. Mr. Carlisle has his heart set on a dining-room which will run the full length of the house."

Marie leaned forward to gaze into her fiancé's face. "Couldn't you perhaps, mon cher, tear down the wall that divides the rooms on the other side of the hall? On the blueprints which you showed me there were two rooms that opened on to the north veranda."

Bill nodded. "The original dining-room and sitting-room. But tearing down that wall would mean eliminating a very handsome fireplace which is flanked on either side by beautiful built-in china cupboards. Mr. Carlisle is very fond of the original dining-room. He plans to use it for private parties when the inn——"

"Inn?" Aunt Julie set down her cup and saucer. "I thought Magnolia Manor was to become a night club."

Bill laughed. "A little of each, I guess. With the place situated as it is on a country road thirty miles from town, some arrangement should be made for overnight and weekend guests, don't you agree?"

"Absolutely," Aunt Julie said. "And what are you going to name this inn?"

Bill's grin widened. "Swamp Ghost Inn," he said. "When Mr. Carlisle became interested in Magnolia Manor he heard that it was haunted by a headless spectre that rises weeping and wailing from the swamp at midnight." He chuckled. "He claims to be very much disappointed that this ghost never materialized when they stayed out there during the Mardi Gras."

Aunt Julie laughed heartily. "So my brother was telling me the other day. Paul said Mr. Carlisle even complained to him that he would never have bought it if he hadn't thought a ghost went with it."

Vicki saw with surprise that Marie was shivering slightly. In a low voice she said to Bill, "Mr. Carlisle should be glad that headless thing did not annoy him and his wife. Madame saw it once a long time ago when she visited the old plantation. She said it was a frightful sight."

Dusty howled with laughter. "Mme de Fres is so superstitious she could see a ghost walking down Canal Street in broad daylight."

Bill smiled reassuringly at Marie. "What Madame saw was undoubtedly a wisp of fog rising from the marshes. I've spent several nights out there, you know, and when the early morning sun starts to burn off the mist it breaks into really ghostlike shapes."

"I'm dying to see that old plantation," Vicki said. "It sounds like a fascinating place."

"I'll show you around sometime," Bill promised.

"You can see it from the air tomorrow morning, Vic," Dusty said. "We fly over it at a rather low pay the taxes. It strikes me that if he really cared about the family heirlooms he would have raised the money for the taxes in some other way."

"That old mansion must have been crammed with antiques," Bill said, and explained to Vicki: "My boss bought the place lock, stock, and barrel, you know, and it's still adequately furnished, although I imagine Mr. Breaux had already sold the most valuable pieces. However, Mr. Carlisle probably will get a good price when he sells the books that line the wall on the library side." He frowned ruefully at Marie. "It never occurred to me that your uncle would kick up such a fuss about that wall."

Marie, still very pale, murmured, "I simply do not understand it, and oh, Bill, it worries me. He left the house so very cross with you!"

Bill shrugged. "I'm sorry I can't draw up another plan as he suggested. Mr. Carlisle has his heart set on a dining-room which will run the full length of the house."

Marie leaned forward to gaze into her fiancé's face. "Couldn't you perhaps, mon cher, tear down the wall that divides the rooms on the other side of the hall? On the blueprints which you showed me there were two rooms that opened on to the north veranda."

Bill nodded. "The original dining-room and sitting-room. But tearing down that wall would mean eliminating a very handsome fireplace which is flanked on either side by beautiful built-in china cupboards. Mr. Carlisle is very fond of the original dining-room. He plans to use it for private parties when the inn——"

"Inn?" Aunt Julie set down her cup and saucer. "I thought Magnolia Manor was to become a night club."

Bill laughed. "A little of each, I guess. With the place situated as it is on a country road thirty miles from town, some arrangement should be made for overnight and weekend guests, don't you agree?"

"Absolutely," Aunt Julie said. "And what are you going to name this inn?"

Bill's grin widened. "Swamp Ghost Inn," he said. "When Mr. Carlisle became interested in Magnolia Manor he heard that it was haunted by a headless spectre that rises weeping and wailing from the swamp at midnight." He chuckled. "He claims to be very much disappointed that this ghost never materialized when they stayed out there during the Mardi Gras."

Aunt Julie laughed heartily. "So my brother was telling me the other day. Paul said Mr. Carlisle even complained to him that he would never have bought it if he hadn't thought a ghost went with it."

Vicki saw with surprise that Marie was shivering slightly. In a low voice she said to Bill, "Mr. Carlisle should be glad that headless thing did not annoy him and his wife. Madame saw it once a long time ago when she visited the old plantation. She said it was a frightful sight."

Dusty howled with laughter. "Mme de Fres is so superstitious she could see a ghost walking down Canal Street in broad daylight."

Bill smiled reassuringly at Marie. "What Madame saw was undoubtedly a wisp of fog rising from the marshes. I've spent several nights out there, you know, and when the early morning sun starts to burn off the mist it breaks into really ghostlike shapes."

"I'm dying to see that old plantation," Vicki said. "It sounds like a fascinating place."

"I'll show you around sometime," Bill promised.

"You can see it from the air tomorrow morning, Vic," Dusty said. "We fly over it at a rather low altitude before we level off on the way to the Gulf. But I'll bring along my binoculars so you can be sure to spot any ghosts that might be lurking around."

"Fine," Vicki said. "If I must see ghosts I'd rather see 'em from the air."

Mrs. Ewing poured herself another cup of heavily sugared black coffee. "You must show Vicki all the haunted houses in the Vieux Carré this evening, Dusty," she chuckled. "And especially the one where blood is supposed to drip from the ceiling." She turned to Bill. "Does your Mr. Carlisle know the legend of the Dixie Swamp ghost?"

Bill shook his head. "Is there a legend?"

Aunt Julie rocked placidly back and forth. "It started 'way back even before the Civil War. My ancestor was very rich and had many slaves working in the fertile rice bottoms and cotton fields. The trail leading through the swamp was a regular labyrinth."

"It still is," Bill said. "Anybody but a Cajun would get lost after a ten-minute walk from the house."

Aunt Julie nodded. "Cajuns and members of our family. Uncle Etienne, I believe, took Paul and Marie's father, Adrian, through it when they were boys, but not me, for I was only a little girl in those days. At any rate," she went on, "no one was permitted to enter the swamp at night. But one of my ancestors, a headstrong boy, disobeyed, and was never seen again. It is his spirit that is supposed to rise at midnight and traipse through the mansion weeping and wailing, probably looking for his head." Her plump shoulders shook with laughter. "But enough of this. You young people must be tired of an old lady's gossip. Marie, you and Bill run along now with Vicki and Dusty."

Marie's pretty mouth was a round "O" of surprise. "But, Tante, Uncle Paul——"

"Uncle Paul," Mrs. Ewing finished for her, "is a fussy old bachelor. Another couple provides sufficient chaperonage to satisfy even such a one as he. It is only courteous that you should accompany Dusty when he takes your guest on a sight-seeing tour."

Marie's nervous fingers poked at the eyelets in her embroidered skirt. "I wouldn't dare," she murmured.

"Oh, please," Vicki begged. "A double date is always such fun. Dusty's going to get frightfully bored answering all the questions I'll want to ask."

Dusty clutched at his throat and croaked hoarsely, "Help, Marie. I'll lose my voice if you don't come along."

Bill gently tugged at Marie's hands and pulled her to her feet. "Come on, honey. Your uncle can't object if you have Aunt Julie's permission. We won't stay out late."

"We can't," Vicki put in. "I have to be out at the airport before eight. And that reminds me, Marie, would it be very inconvenient if I have breakfast around seven?"

"Oh, no," Marie assured her. "Sarah is always up and around at six, although Uncle Paul's tray is not brought to his room until nine." She moved gracefully around the fountain to kiss her aunt. "I'll go, darling Tante, if you're quite sure Uncle Paul will not disapprove."

Mrs. Ewing snapped her fingers. "I'll take care of him, chérie. If you return before ten, he will not even know you have left the pension. For undoubtedly he has gone to his club where he generally plays cards until ten or so."

Marie gasped. "But that would be deceitful, Tante."

"Fiddlesticks." Aunt Julie waved her hands upward. "Run along, girls, and get something light to wear over your dresses, while your beaus escort me home."

She yawned loudly. "Black coffee always makes me sleepy."

Upstairs in Vicki's room, Marie, who had picked up a quilted cloak as they passed her room, said, "Oh, Vicki, I am so worried. Uncle Paul is really cross with Bill. He may not permit our engagement to be announced next Friday."

Vicki felt like using Aunt Julie's expression, "Fiddlesticks!" It was hard for her to understand how Marie could take her pompous little uncle's childish fit of temper seriously. He had stamped out of the pension in a rage, yes, but it was inconceivable that he should seriously blame Bill for something over which the young architect had no control. And certainly not to the extent of forbidding the announcement of his engagement to Marie.

"Does your uncle often lose his temper so unreasonably?" she asked Marie. "I simply can't see why it makes any difference to him now whether that wall remains standing or not."

"I don't understand it myself." Marie said. "But Uncle Paul never gets angry without a good reason. Generally he's as even-tempered as an angel."

"He was rather cross with you before lunch when you forgot the shrimps," Vicki pointed out as she tied a scarf around her ash-blonde hair.

"But naturally," Marie said. "He likes his food properly prepared. And what is a gumbo without shrimp?"

"A perfectly delicious concoction, I imagine," Vicki said rather impatiently. "If you ask me, I think your uncle had an attack of indigestion from overeating. He probably is all over it by now."

Marie stared at Vicki's reflection in the long mirror. "Do you really think so? That's what Tante said."

"And your aunt Julie is a very wise woman, I'll bet," Vicki said with a smile. "Come on. Isn't that someone honking a horn down in the street?"

"That must be Bill," Marie said, smiling herself now. "He's got the cutest little blue Bantam car which he calls the Bug. Tante, who can't even get through the door, calls it a gnat." She led the way down the inside staircase to the tunnel-like passageway. The boys were waiting for them out in the street.

"Behold the Bug," Bill said, pointing proudly to his tiny blue convertible. "Sorry it won't hold us all, but Dusty thought you might rather go sight-seeing in a horse and buggy, anyway, Vicki."

"I'd love it," Vicki cried.

Arm in arm, the two couples strolled along the narrow street to the centre of town. On Canal Street they hailed the elderly Negro driver of an ancient but highly polished carriage with a fringed canopy. He doffed his stovepipe hat as they climbed up the high step into the buggy.

"Take us to Jackson Square, please," Dusty said.

"I'd be pleased to," the driver said with a broad grin.

The old horse clopped-clopped off and Vicki said with a giggle, "This must be the original 'surrey with the fringe on top.'"

"We could walk to the Square much more quickly," Dusty said. "But when I take a girl sight-seeing I like to do it in style."

As the horse ambled through the French Quarter Vicki was shown the historic landmarks: the ancient, three-steepled Cathedral of St. Louis, the Cabildo with its nine massive arches, famous restaurants and antique shops on Royal Street.

"Now for a stroll along the levee to the old French Market," Dusty said as he dismissed the driver. "It's

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after nine and in the true New Orleans tradition all parties end with coffee and our famous square, holeless doughnuts, Vic."

"I never thought I'd be hungry again after that huge dinner," Vicki said, "but I am."

The moon was shining down on the river front and half of the city seemed to be walking there too. Here floated ships at dock from all over the United States and all over the world.

"This is the pride of New Orleans," Bill said with a wave of his hand toward the long line of steel sheds on the wharves. "One of the most unique and probably the most modern port in the world. Take a sniff," he told Vicki, "and you'll smell tea from China, wood pulp from Scandinavia, olives from Spain, nitrate from Chile, rubber from the East Indies, not to mention bushels and bushels of grain from your own Midwest."

Vicki sniffed and was impressed. A Negro bearing upon his head a basket of roses and ferns came toward them, and the boys bought bouquets for the girls.

The stalls in the old French Market were being filled with produce by farmers who arrived in the early evening, and would stay until dawn, the marketing hour. Vicki was so busy looking around at the profusion of strawberries, crabs with their claws waving, sea-grey shrimp, Easter lilies and even bales of cotton, that she nearly lost her footing on the cobblestones.

Seated on stools at the counter having coffee and delicious-smelling doughnuts, rubbing elbows unconcernedly with one another, were fishmongers and dowagers, debutantes and day labourers, businessmen and black-haired, barefoot men in overalls. One of these sturdy-looking, sunburned men joined a friend at the counter, seating himself not far from Vicki. She noticed that they spoke a lazy French-English.

"Who are those handsome, barefoot men?" Vicki whispered across Bill to Marie. "Cajuns?"

Marie looked and nodded. "I know the young one in the blue shirt. He often brings fish to the pension. He's called Saint, but he's full of the dickens. Once he sneaked a live lobster into Madame's sewing basket. Sarah refused to buy anything from him for weeks."

"Seems to me I've seen that young one somewhere," Bill said thoughtfully.

"You probably have, mon cher," Marie told him. "He lives in a bayou village not very far from Magnolia Manor. He has perhaps sold fish to that eccentric night watchman of yours who lives out there weekends."

"Eccentric is the word for Jehoshaphat Boots, all right," Bill chuckled. "But I couldn't get along without the old fellow. My day crew," he explained to Vicki and Dusty, "works from eight to four, weekdays only. Boots keeps an eye on the place nights and Saturdays and Sundays. Claims he doesn't need more than an occasional forty winks."

"Besides being the sleepless wonder," Dusty said, "how else is he eccentric?"

"Oh, in lots of little ways," Bill answered. "I drive him back and forth in the Bug, so we've got to know each other pretty well during the past six months. He's an old Orleanian and as full of superstitions as Mme de Fres."

"Perhaps he, too, has seen the swamp ghost," Marie said, half-smiling, half-serious.

"No, he hasn't," Bill said, laughing. "When Mr. Carlisle was complaining that the house wasn't haunted after all, Boots told him he'd like to have a ghost for company, with or without a head. It would take more than a bit of fog to scare that old codger, but he refuses to sweep a porch after sundown because that brings bad luck, and he's got sweet basil growing beside both the front and back steps because that brings good luck." Bill shrugged. "I don't care what he does as long as he keeps one eye open when he's on duty. Mr. Carlisle has spent a mint of money remodelling that mansion."

"Speaking of a sleepless wonder," Dusty said, suppressing a yawn, "that's something I'm not. It's almost ten. We'd better scram."

Marie slid off her stool with a gasp. "Oh, dear. We'll have to run all the way back to the pension. Uncle Paul will never forgive me if I'm not back before he's locked up for the night."

She looked so much like a frightened Cinderella that Vicki felt a surge of sympathy for the little orphan girl. There was no doubt in Vicki's mind now that Marie was really afraid of her uncle. But why, if he was, as she herself had said, normally as even-tempered as an angel? Did Uncle Paul have some hold over his ward that made it easy for him to keep her, as Dusty had hinted, an unpaid housekeeper in the pension?

It was Uncle Paul himself who opened the heavy door after Marie had lifted the iron knocker and let it fall from her slim, nervous fingers. And he was every bit as angry as he was when he left the house during dinner.

He bowed coldly to Dusty. "If you will forgive my inhospitality, I should like to talk to Mr. Graham privately. The young ladies will, of course, retire at once. Good night, sir."

"Oh, Uncle Paul," Marie wailed, "it is only a little after ten. Please punish me all you think I deserve, but allow Vicki to say bonsoir to Dusty."

Even in the dim light that seeped through the dusty lantern over the pension door, Vicki could see that her host was white with barely controlled anger and that Marie was on the verge of tears. Hoping to ease the strain, Vicki turned quickly to Dusty.

"Good night," she said, trying to smile. "See you at the airport in the morning."

But Dusty, apparently, was not one to run away and let others face the music. "See here, Mr. Breaux," he said uncomfortably, "Marie came along tonight with Aunt Julie's full approval. I'm sorry if we've kept you up by returning a little late, but it's entirely my fault. I was the only one of us wearing a watch."

The little old gentleman teetered back and forth in his shiny-toed shoes. "For the second time this evening, sir," he roared, "I must ask you to mind your own business. If you do not leave at once I shall forbid you ever to enter my home again." He whirled on Bill. "And as for you, sir, you are never to cross this threshold as long as I am alive." With a gesture that too closely resembled a blow, he waved Marie into the dark passageway behind him. "Go to your room at once. And if you so much as attempt to write or telephone to this fellow, I shall keep you locked in until he leaves the city."

Bill, who obviously was trying to control his own red-headed temper, said evenly, "Come now, Mr. Breaux, aren't you carrying things too far?"

Uncle Paul's pale eyes were yellow slits in his head. "You have nothing to say in this matter. I am Marie's guardian."

"But you forget, sir," Bill said hotly, "that if she can prove ill-treatment she can petition for emancipation on her eighteenth birthday. I advise you not to keep her locked in her room."

Marie was silently weeping now. "Oh, please go, Bill," she sobbed. "You're just making everything worse." She disappeared in the shadowy corridor and Vicki hurried after her with what she hoped was a gay good night to Bill and Dusty.

When Vicki caught up with her, Marie was hovering on the second-floor landing like a terrified mouse. Vicki groped for her hand in the semi-darkness and whispered reassuringly:

"Don't worry, darling, everything will come out all right. Your aunt Julie will take care of your uncle. She promised, remember?"

The front door slammed then and they heard Uncle Paul stamping down the hall to his den. Tightly clutching Vicki's hand, Marie slipped into her room and turned on the lights.

Vicki was shocked by the pinched whiteness of the young girl's face.

"It's all over now," Marie moaned in a whisper. "And to think that this had to happen just as I was beginning to live. I did not know what real happiness was until Bill came. Until then I lived only to please Uncle Paul and try to repay him for taking me, a penniless orphan, into his home and sharing what little he had with me."

So that was the hold Uncle Paul had over his niece! "And I'll bet he never lets a day go by without reminding Marie of his generosity," Vicki decided inwardly. Aloud she said dubiously, "A penniless orphan, Marie? Surely your parents left you insurance or something?"

Marie shook her head and covered her face with her small hands. "No, nothing, Vicki. My father had just started into business for himself when he became ill. He invested all of his savings and my mother's dowry in the firm, which collapsed at his death when there was nobody to carry it on. I owe everything to Uncle Paul, everything."

Vicki thought for a minute. "But what about Magnolia Manor? Wasn't your father one of your great-uncle's heirs?"

Marie began to get ready for bed, walking nervously back and forth between Vicki's chair and the huge armoire. "It will be hard for you, a Yankee, to understand this, Vicki, but my father, Adrian Breaux, was disinherited simply because he married my mother, who was not a Creole. In his first will, Great-uncle Etienne stated that everything was to be divided equally between his two nephews. But when my father disobeyed him and married my mother, he made out a second will leaving everything to Uncle Paul."

"Your great-uncle sounds as eccentric as Bill's Jehoshaphat Boots," Vicki exploded. "Surely your uncle must recognize the unfairness of that second will and feel that half of the money he got from the sale of the plantation belongs to you."

Marie slipped under the covers of her big bed and stared up at the high ceiling. "According to Creole traditions there was nothing unfair about that second will at all, Vicki. Besides, Uncle Paul must have spent more than half of what Mr. Carlisle paid him on me already. My food and clothing and education for more than seventeen years! The only unfair part of it is that when Uncle Paul agreed to be my guardian he thought that I would inherit my mother's dowry. It's a wonder he didn't put me in an orphan asylum when he learned that my father had invested it in his new business."

Vicki could not keep silent this time. "Fiddlesticks," she cried. "Do you think anybody would put his brother's child in an orphanage as long as he had a cent to his name? And even if your uncle *had* done such a dreadful thing, your aunt would have taken you right out again. Furthermore, for the past few years you've worked without pay in this pension. I honestly don't think you should feel so terribly indebted to your uncle, Marie."

Marie closed her eyes wearily. "Oh, but I do, Vicki. And I could never, *never* do anything without his approval. I'll just have to try to forget all about Bill."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," Vicki sniffed. "I'll bet Aunt Julie can twist her brother around her little finger. Go to sleep now and have pleasant dreams. She'll see to it that the engagement is announced at your birthday party next Friday as scheduled."

"I hope you're right, Vicki," Marie said, drowsy-eyed now. "Uncle Paul can't really stay angry with Bill when he realizes that it's the new owner's fault the parlour wall has to be torn down, can he?"

"Of course not." Vicki tiptoed out of the room and down the balcony to her own room. She was so tired it was an effort to wash and undress. She tumbled into bed and fell asleep almost immediately.

It seemed as though she had hardly closed her eyes when she was awakened by the sound of voices coming up from the locked parlour below. "It's Bill," Vicki thought, half-dreaming. "He's come back to make Uncle Paul see reason." She couldn't resist the temptation to creep to the head of the inside staircase and listen. "If it is Bill," she decided, "and they're talking pleasantly together, I'll wake up Marie so she'll know the whole silly quarrel has come to an end."

But to Vicki's disappointment, the low-voiced conversation seemed to be carried on in a mixture of French and English. Bill's accent, she knew, was as New England as hers was Illinois, so Mr. Breaux's guest must be somebody else. Every now and then that somebody laughed, but it was not Bill's hearty "Ho, ho, ho."

"Back to bed, you eavesdropper," Vicki scolded herself. In another minute she was sound asleep, but again she was awakened—this time by the chimes of the French clock downstairs striking eleven times. The folding doors of the locked parlour were being shut and locked, rather stealthily, Vicki thought. Then she heard footsteps going quietly down the tunnel-like passageway to the front door.

"That's funny," she wondered. "What's Uncle Paul doing with a visitor at this hour if the pension is supposed to be locked up shortly after ten?"

Full of curiosity she tiptoed to the window overlooking the street and peeped through the jalousie. Someone was skulking away in the shadows. But even more curious to Vicki was the smug expression on Uncle Paul's face as he stood for a second under the light over the pension door. He glanced up suddenly as though he might have heard her fumbling with the blinds, and she hastily ducked back and jumped into bed.

"He looked as pleased as Punch," she reflected, "so he's certainly recovered his good humour. He's probably thoroughly ashamed of himself by now."

The chimes were striking midnight when Vicki was awakened for the third time that night, by the sound of someone locking or unlocking the heavy front door from the outside. That must be Uncle Paul, for he was the only one who had a key. She was across the room like a flash. What *was* going on tonight?

Peering through the slats, Vicki saw that her host was indeed locking himself out of the pension and guessed that it must have been the jangling of the keys on the big ring at his waist that had awakened her.

Where could he be going at that hour, midnight? It was certainly strange, for Vicki had the impression that Mr. Breaux retired shortly after ten o'clock. Aunt Julie had said her brother generally left his club around ten; Marie had said the pension was locked then for the night. Even Dusty had apologized for keeping the old gentleman up when the two couples returned a few minutes past ten.

But Uncle Paul had had a mysterious visitor an hour later who had skulked away from the pension. And now Uncle Paul himself, walking as silently as a cat and keeping to the shadows, was hurrying towards Canal Street.

Vicki finally fell into a sound sleep still wondering about the strange events that had taken place on her first night in the Vieux Carré

CHAPTER V

The Eavesdropper

VICKI AWOKE THE NEXT MORNING WHEN SARAH TAPPED on her door.

"Bonjour, Miss Vicki," she said, setting the breakfast tray on a low table. "You are not the only early riser this bright, sunny morning. M'sieu, who never opens his eyes until I awaken him at nine, is already fully dressed, demanding his omelet and coffee for he has an eight-o'clock business appointment."

Vicki sipped her ice-cold fruit juice meditatively. "Mr. Breaux seems to require a lot of sleep, doesn't he, Sarah? Almost eleven hours if he generally retires shortly after ten."

Sarah compressed her lips disapprovingly. "M'sieu cares for nothing except eating and sleeping—and money, if he can get it without working. In all the years that I have worked in this pension I have never seen him downstairs before ten; and as for that busines appointment, it must be with a bill collector, for M'sieu has many debts, some of them as old as little Marie." She folded her brown hands in her crisp white apron. "I pity that man's poor tailor. Every few months a new suit must be made to order of the finest cloth, and when the little hunchback presents his bill, M'sieu sends him away with a dollar or two. He must have a different suit for every day in the week, but if one cannot afford such luxury, one should learn to get along with less, n'est-ce pas, Miss Vicki?"

Vicki nodded, thinking how her father eked out his professor's salary with his consultative services to businessmen's groups, and how she herself had earned her Christmas money by selling perfume in Frazier's store before she became a flight stewardess. Why, even little Ginny had gone into the fudge business to earn her own spending money.

"Now you," Sarah went on, warming to her subject, "barely out of your teens and already earning your own living! That is good. But tell me, Miss Vicki, do all flight stewardesses have to get up so early in the morning?"

Vicki laughed as she slipped into her trim uniform. "Sometimes we have to get up much earlier. Why, a friend of mine is out at the airport right now getting things ready for the seven-thirty flight to New York." She stopped as she heard a stealthy sound on the other side of the French doors which Sarah had left slightly ajar.

Vicki was across the room in a flash. She peered through the crack just in time to see Marie's uncle moving swiftly along the balcony to his own room. He had undoubtedly been eavesdropping, but why?

She stared at his retreating back and saw to her surprise that Mr. Breaux was wearing the same sleek black suit he had worn the evening before. But Sarah had just now said that the fastidious old gentleman wore a different suit every day of the week.

Vicki quickly put two and two together. Mr. Breaux had been up all night and had only just returned to the pension. He must have bumped into Sarah bringing up Vicki's tray and had hastily explained his early morning presence by claiming a business appointment. All very mysterious.

Vicki finished dressing and set her perky blue cap on her silvery-blonde hair, wondering where Marie's uncle had been between midnight and seven A.M.

Outside in the street she took a deep breath of the fresh morning air and dismissed the mystery of Uncle Paul from her mind. It was a fine, sunny, breezy morning and the sky was as clear as a blue lake. Nearing the centre of the city, Vicki was struck by the high buzzing whine of the trolley cars—it sounded like the drone of a thousand bumblebees. On Canal Street she hailed a cab and drove out to the airport.

Vicki reported to the Assistant Superintendent of Flight Stewardesses, signed in, then swung happily across the immense airfield. She passed huge silver planes warming up, coming in for a landing, taking off, and young ground crewmen hosing gasoline into the engines of parked planes. Pilots and stewardesses in uniforms and flight caps similar to her own were heading for the hangars too. Though Vicki was brand new on this field, a dozen people waved to her and called:

"Good morning!"

"Perfect flight conditions today!"

That was one of the nicest things about her job, Vicki decided, being a member of the flying fraternity. Besides, she was flying to Guatemala City, and would be there that afternoon. Vicki was excited about visiting that mile-high capital of the second largest country in Central America. She had read that tall mountain peaks towered above lush jungles and rich plantations, and that Guatemala was famous for its sugar-cane and tobacco fields. There were Indian villages dating back to Maya days, and seaports on both the Caribbean and the Pacific.

"Hi, Vic!" It was Captain Tom Jordan, dodging an air-mail truck as he strode up to her. He wore the trim blue flight uniform too, and Vicki felt very proud to be wearing the same silver wings as her senior pilot. "Isn't this a beauty of a day?" He beamed down at her. "Our ship's in Hangar 4, Vic, straight ahead. Tell the mechanics you're on Flight 701."

"Aye, aye, sir." Vicki gave him a left-handed salute and a grin. "I feel like a slacker. Dusty said I'd have to be ready at seven on the button if I wanted him to drive me out this morning. I passed up a lift for a little more sleep. Are you going for the weather forecast now, cap'n?"

"That's right," the pilot said. "If Dusty's in the hangar, send him to me in the meteorologist's room. From there, I'm going to the traffic control tower." He started off and said over one shoulder, "I'll send you your manifest in a few minutes. Heard from the flight superintendent just now that you're going to find it a pretty interesting passenger list."

He strode away before Vicki could ask him a question about "the pretty interesting" passenger or passengers. She was dying of curiosity—it might be anybody from a foreign princess to an eloping couple —but she would just have to wait until her manifest arrived.

Vicki hurried on to the hangar, humming and swinging her overnight kit in her hand. Wouldn't it be fun if Marie had the courage to elope with Bill and they were flying to Guatemala City on Flight 701? No such luck, she decided. Timid little Marie wouldn't do anything without Uncle Paul's blessing. Remembering the frightened look in Marie's enormous black eyes the evening before when her uncle had threatened to keep her locked in her room, Vicki abruptly came to a decision. For all his Old World charm and southern hospitality, she didn't like Paul Breaux. And yet both Dusty and her mother's friend, Mrs. Landry, had assured her that she *would* like him. What had happened to change him so much?

She had realized from the beginning that he was pompous and self-centred and fancied himself as a dandy and a gourmet; but those were all fairly harmless traits. If Marie herself did not object to being "kept under glass" according to the old Creole traditions, Vicki had no business finding fault with the old gentleman for his treatment of his niece. At least not until he had threatened her and ordered her fiancé "never to darken his doorway again." That was carrying things too far. Bill's remark that the wall of the traditionally locked parlour in the old plantation house would be torn down had touched off Paul Breaux's anger. But what was behind it? Not sentiment, Vicki felt sure. As Tante Julie had said, if Marie's uncle really cared a hoot about the family mansion he would not have allowed it to lie neglected for seventeen years; nor would he have parted with any of the family heirlooms. He could easily have saved the money for the taxes by slimming down on his diet and wardrobe, for Bill had said that the taxes were under a hundred dollars a year.

Vicki's thoughts went back to Uncle Paul's mysterious visitor the evening before and his own stealthy departure an hour later, and no matter how hard she tried she couldn't help worrying for fear Aunt Julie might not be able to persuade her brother to change his mind about Bill and Marie.

"I won't be able to find out about that until I return to the pension around nine tomorrow evening," she reflected. "So I may as well dismiss the whole Breaux family from my mind until then."

In the huge, domed hangar, where planes stood being tuned up, Vicki breathed in the pungent smell of oil and metal. The place was a hive of activity, with engines singing and mechanics shouting back and forth. Vicki found Dusty up on a wing with two mechanics, poking in the engines of a great silver airliner.

"My ship," she thought with satisfaction, and called out cheerily, "Morning, Dusty. I'm here."

"Hi, Pint Size." He clambered down off the plane. "Did Uncle Paul eat you alive last night?"

Vicki shook her head. "No, he was too busy to bother with little me. Dusty, do you think he meant what he said about Bill and Marie?"

Dusty wiped his hands on a rag. "I'm afraid so, Vicki. He's good and mad, and frankly I don't get it. Why should he kick up such a storm about that old wall? It's too bad that he's peevishly taking out his spite on Bill. But Bill's going to outmanœuvre him and get to see Marie, anyway."

"How?" Vicki demanded. "She wouldn't dare disobey her uncle."

"Yes, but don't forget Aunt Julie's on Bill's side. He called her last night and wangled an invitation for tea tomorrow. It's not Marie's fault, is it, if she happens to be there too, helping her aunt with plans for the birthday ball?"

Vicki grinned. "Well, now I feel a lot better. You know, Dusty, I've come to the conclusion that there's something dishonest about Paul Breaux. It *is* dishonest to buy things you can't afford to pay for, and I think I caught him in a lie this morning." She told him then about the mysterious happenings. "Where do you suppose he was all night?"

Dusty frowned. "You've got me, but we can't stand around here all morning wondering about it."

"We certainly can't," Vicki agreed. "I've got lots to do and Captain Jordan wants to see you in the meteorologist's room."

"Right." Dusty picked up his cap and left the hangar. Vicki climbed up into her kingdom, the long, comfortably furnished cabin. She put her name plate in the holder and began to inspect the rows of reclining chairs, the washroom and the galley, her tiny kitchen. Yes, the cleaning crew had left everything immaculate.

Next she checked the supplies: blankets, pillows, chewing gum, first-aid kit, diapers, a doll and other toys to amuse restless young passengers; air maps, stationery, copies of the morning newspaper and current magazines to amuse the adults; soap, towels, cleaning rag, even a fly swatter and oxygen masks which she had never had occasion to use.

Vicki felt like a conscientious housekeeper expecting guests. "Well, I *am* playing hostess." She smiled to herself, thinking that after all her job was pretty much like Marie's work at the pension. "Except that Marie doesn't have twenty-one guests practically every day, and isn't responsible for their well-being a mile or more above the earth."

Up and down the slanting aisle Vicki climbed, and rapidly checked the air conditioning, the electric lights, and the interphone connecting her with the pilots' cabin up front.

"Good morning, miss." It was the man from the commissary, wheeling twenty-one precooked, frozen breakfasts which Vicki would reheat in the galley. She quickly put away the food, also the vats of coffee, fruit juice and water, cellophane-wrapped silver, dishes and linen.

Dusty appeared then and handed Vicki her manifest with the passengers' names, weights, and destinations. "And here's the flight plan," he said.

They went over the flight plan together and reviewed the meteorologist's report so that Vicki could answer the questions which passengers invariably asked about routes, altitudes, flying speeds, winds, visibility, and whether the stewardess thought the plane would arrive on time.

"Perfect visibility," Dusty said, handing his binoculars to Vicki. "You'll be able to get a good look at the Breaux plantation when we fly over it. And the flying should be as smooth as glass today. The other passengers probably won't bother you at all, so you can spend a lot of time with your young Cajuns."

"Cajuns?" Vicki looked up from her manifest in surprise. So they were the interesting passengers Captain Jordan had mentioned. "But, Dusty, I thought the Cajuns spent all of their time hunting and fishing and trapping in the swampland."

Dusty laughed. "Not *all* of the Cajuns *all* of the time, but it *is* rare for any of them to travel many miles from their villages. You're probably going to be the first and only stewardess who ever flew with a real honest-to-goodness Cajun couple. I gather the St. Clairs have been saving for a long time and this round trip to Merida and back is sort of a belated and very brief honeymoon."

"St. Clair," Vicki repeated. "Do you suppose the husband is the boy, Saint, we saw at the market last night?"

"I wouldn't be at all surprised," Dusty said. "The passenger agent told me they look like a couple of kids. Said his eyes nearly popped out of his head when they drove up in a buggy at dawn. Lucky for you the only cancellations on a trip they could afford were on Flight 701 as far as Merida, Mexico. Cajuns seldom make much money and when they do it burns holes in their pockets."

"Oh," Vicki cried, disappointed. "Then that means they'll disembark at our first stop. I wish they were flying all the way to Guatemala with us."

Dusty chuckled. "They'll have talked your head off by then. There's nothing a Cajun likes better than an honest-to-goodness gumbo ya-ya."

"Then I won't tell 'em any secrets," Vicki said with a smile. She could hardly wait now until their plane had been towed out to Runway 1. When it had been fuelled, and loaded with luggage and cargo, she took up her position at the door of the passenger cabin and began checking off each passenger by name as he or she came up the steps.

And then she saw the St. Clairs, the young wife clinging shyly to her husband's hand. They were both barefoot, and Saint, for it was he, was wearing faded overalls, a clean blue shirt and a farmer's hat. His tiny black-haired wife was dressed in a starched white cotton frock.

"Why, she looks younger than Marie," Vicki thought in amazement, "and she's every bit as beautiful!"

The other passengers were streaming up the steps now, mostly dark Latin-American businessmen who greeted her with the unfailing courtesy which Vicki knew from past experience came from their hearts.

Last of all came the Cajun honeymooners. Vicki gave them her warmest smile. "Mr. and Mrs. St. Clair?"

Saint looked startled for a moment as he recognized her and then he said easily, "Did I not see you last evening in the market with Mlle Breaux?"

Vicki nodded. "I didn't think you would recognize me in uniform."

His black eyes twinkled. "I never forget a face, and especially a pretty one." Gently he pushed his wife in front of him. "This is Miz St. Clair, mademoiselle. She is not always so timid, but we have never been in the air before."

Doucette St. Clair—Vicki could not think of this tiny, lovely girl as "Miz" anybody—showed two rows of perfect, white teeth as she giggled. "Saint makes the joke, mademoiselle. I am not afraid of flying like a bird." But she kept a tight grip on her husband's hand as they moved gracefully past Vicki into the plane.

The passenger agent grinned after them and handed Vicki the logbook and mail pouch, which she would deliver to the captain. Just before he slammed the door he chuckled:

"Watch your step with those Cajun kids, they're smart. They'll probably end up in the pilot's seat, flying the ship themselves."

Vicki laughed and hurried up and down the aisle to make sure that all the passengers, and especially the St. Clairs, were strapped in for the take-off. "They may be smart and the best trappers in the world," she thought, "but I'll bet they have trouble finding their seat belts."

To her surprise, she found that Saint had already strapped the belt around his wife's tiny waist and was firmly buckling his own.

"My goodness," Vicki gasped to herself. "They *are* smart. I'd better remember the passenger agent's advice. But," she ended with a chuckle as the pilots up front gunned the big plane's motors, "keeping an eye on them will be fun."

CHAPTER VI

Barefoot Passengers

THE PROPELLERS STARTED TO WHIRL; THEY SANG AND then mounted to a roar. Dust flew up. Outside, the ground crew backed away. The starter dropped his white flag. Vicki ran for her jump seat in the back and strapped herself in. The plane rolled down the runway, turned around, rapidly taxied the full length of the field and lightly began to lift.

They were up! No matter how many times she flew, each time Vicki nearly burst with excitement.

They were gaining altitude and Vicki peered down through Dusty's binoculars. In another minute they should be flying over the Breaux plantation. And then she saw what must be the mansion, surrounded by live oaks bearded with Spanish moss. A road dipped away from the house, southward, and was lost in the cypress trees of Dixie Swamp. Parked in a clearing not far from the road was a little blue Bantam car.

"The Bug," Vicki thought as the plane rose higher and levelled off. "What an industrious young man Bill is to be at work before nine on a Saturday morning." She wondered about that a little, since Bill had said the day crew did not work weekends. "He's so energetic," she chuckled inwardly, "he's probably down there plastering and painting with nobody to help him but old Boots."

Vicki hastened into her galley, popped the first batch of breakfasts in the oven, and started to set up trays. Serving meals in a dipping, rolling plane was tricky and called for speed. She hoped no one would buzz her just yet. No one did for they were all, except the Cajuns, seasoned travellers.

With a tray balanced in either hand, Vicki began serving breakfasts, starting at the rear of the plane so as not to tantalise those not yet served. She had given the young Cajuns seats up front where the riding was smoothest, and brought the last two trays to them.

Henri stared at the food with surprise. "Thank you, no, mademoiselle. Nothing but coffee for us, please. I do not eat anything that was not cooked at home."

"But you'll starve before you get back home," Vicki protested. "Please eat a little something. It's all delicious."

"No, we will not starve," Saint said, deftly rearranging the trays so that one contained the food, the other, two cups of black coffee. "A plane takes us right back home a few minutes after we land in Merida." Delicately, almost suspiciously, he sipped the steaming hot coffee. "But this is delicious, mademoiselle. Miz St. Clair and I will drink as much of your fine coffee as you have the time to bring us."

After Vicki had tidied up her galley, she brought a pot of strong black coffee to the young couple. Doucette thanked her with her soft black eyes, and Vicki, consumed with curiosity, said, "I was told that this is your wedding trip. Is that right?"

Saint glanced out the window and Doucette wriggled her dainty bare toes ecstatically. "It is like you say, mademoiselle, but we have the wedding a long time ago. Regardez. Saint, he work hard. Get him fine chicken yard and cow. Saint catch him many shrimp and crab and oysters; swap at store and get him pirogue. Saint trap him plenty big muskrats, sell skin; buy nice buggy. We put eggs and milk and skins and shrimp and crab in buggy and drive to market. So now we are rich, hein?"

She smiled, waving her oddly patrician hands expressively. "We Cajun, we spend our money quick like flash of lightning. So we take ride in the air before it is all gone. Is good idea, no?"

Vicki laughed. "A very good idea."

Saint took up the explanation. "I went to school two-three years more than Miz St. Clair. I speak good English. My people do not like to travel. But I say to my chérie when we open our eyes this fine morning, we will take one ride in the air, and after that we will stay in our bayou village and be content. C'est comme ça!"

They looked at each other so approvingly, so lovingly that Vicki thought: "They're true descendants of Evangeline's people. Only in this case, Evangeline got her Gabriel." She mentally crossed her fingers. "In spite of Uncle Paul, Marie has got to get her Gabriel too." Vicki, suddenly becoming practical again, added another wish:

"I hope these cute Cajuns don't get airsick and ruin their trip."

But they didn't, and every spare moment from then on, Vicki spent with this charming young couple. They drank cup after cup of scalding coffee as they talked. She learned from Saint about the boat races in Dixie Swamp and how the Cajuns skim over the water at amazing speeds in their frail little pirogues. He nodded towards the pilots' cabin, his black eyes twinkling mischievously.

"Your captain can fly this big silver ship, but he could not handle our pirogues. Only the bayou-born can make them behave. We are taught when we are very young." He smiled proudly down at Doucette. "Miz St. Clair can paddle as well as I can."

Both of them began to talk at once, laughing and gesticulating and dropping back and forth from French to English so that it was hard for Vicki to understand much of what they said.

She gathered that there were dances every Saturday night in the bayou village and that at the end the leader of the musicians fired a pistol into the air, shouting, "Le bal est fini!"

"All Cajuns like a good time," Saint explained. "We do not mind hard work, but we must have the fun too." He chuckled, winking at Doucette. "And it is best of all when we get paid for having fun, n'est-ce pas, chérie?"

Doucette giggled and her toes began to wriggle again. "My Saint, he make the good joke. Is so funny, I—how you say?—split the sides. Saint is so smart. He is only Cajun in the village who make big money having the good time."

"I get paid for having a good time too," Vicki said with a grin. "I love my job."

Saint gave her a swift, disapproving look. "The Cajun women do not have jobs," he said. "All Cajuns have many babies and all Cajun children are good." The stern look melted into a broad smile. "We are told as babies, 'Be good or the loup-garous will get you!'"

Loup-garous! "Werewolves," Vicki translated mentally. Aloud she said, "How awful! Are the children really frightened?"

Doucette broke into a peal of merry laughter. "No. Is simple to chase away the loup-garous. They scared of frogs. All Cajun children carry frogs in pants pocket to throw at them things!"

All too soon the sign up in front flashed on: No Smoking—Fasten Your Seat Belt. So Vicki knew they were nearing Merida, Mexico. She hastily saw that everyone was strapped in and then retreated to her jump seat.

The ship circled for a landing, hovered over palm trees in the hot, blue air, then touched ground as lightly as a butterfly. It couldn't have been a more perfect first flight for Saint and Doucette.

Vicki unstrapped herself, seized her manifest and report book, and was standing at the door when the plane rolled to a stop.

"Good-bye," she said to the St. Clairs. "I hope you enjoyed your trip."

"Oh, but, yes, mademoiselle," they cried together. "Someday maybe we take you for a ride in our pirogue, no?"

Neither one of them paid any attention to the stares of the other passengers and ignored the startled look on the face of the Mexican passenger agent as they strode gracefully away from the plane. In the waiting room Vicki saw them sitting close together, laughing and talking in their rapid French-English as they waited for the return flight. As she passed them, they smiled at her a little guiltily and she felt quite sure that they had been talking about her.

"I'm probably as foreign to them as they are to me," she decided with a giggle, and hurried back to the plane. Soon the ship was up in the air again, clearing the roofs of Merida, en route to Guatemala.

Later, as she and Dusty sat on the sunny terrace of the Hotel Victoria in the picturesque Central American city, Vicki told him how much she had enjoyed her flight with the Cajuns.

"I'd like nothing better," she finished, "than to accept their invitation and ride through the bayous in a pirogue."

"No, you wouldn't," Dusty assured her. "The only way to go sight-seeing in Dixie Swamp is by helicopter. If you'd really like to visit a Cajun village I think I can arrange it."

"Oh, I'd love it! Can you rent helicopters in New Orleans?"

"No," Dusty told her, "but a couple of my pals are buying one on the instalment plan. They've gone into the exterminating business and spray the cotton fields from the air with DDT. I'll borrow their 'eggbeater' sometime. I took a six-month course when they did, and several times since then I've handled one of the dual controls when they went out on a dusting job. It's a rescue type with four seats."

Vicki, thrilled at the idea of a helicopter trip, cried, "Then maybe Bill and Marie could go along? That is, if Uncle Paul has got over his peevishness by then."

"Maybe," Dusty said doubtfully. He wiped his face with his handkerchief. "Wow, but it's hot! Let's take a dip in that de luxe swimming pool down there. It'll be cooler this evening, then you and I and Captain Jordan can stroll along Sixth Avenue. He says it's the Rue de la Paix of this town."

They took off Sunday afternoon from the Guatemala City airport. Vicki served a meal at the odd hour of four, a sort of high tea, which suited the tastes of her Central American passengers.

The Caribbean was very blue as they flew over it towards the North American continent. Sunset clouds gathered into radiant sculptures. Vicki watched from the rear window, fascinated as the great clouds faded and blew away, and night fell. They flew on through darkness and as the plane began to lose altitude nearing the New Orleans airport Vicki stared sleepily down at Dixie Swamp, wondering if her Cajun couple had got home safely.

A tiny light was flickering there. To Vicki, without the aid of the binoculars, which she had tucked away in the galley, it looked like a giant firefly. "Probably a Cajun in one village signalling to a friend in another," she decided. "Or maybe," she giggled inwardly, "it's Saint sending a message to Doucette saying he'll be late for dinner."

They landed at eight and it was almost nine when Vicki had checked through her plane and turned in her reports. She said good night to Captain Jordan, who had rented a car and a room in a near-by country inn. Then she drove to town with Dusty.

As they neared the Breaux pension, Vicki saw that someone was coming out the big front door.

"Hey," Dusty cried in surprise, pulling in to the kerb. "There's your Cajun friend again. Probably leaving an engraved invitation for that pirogue ride," he teased.

Vicki called out, "Saint!" But the boy was already lost in the shadows, his bare feet making no sound as he hurried away.

"It's kind of late, isn't it," she asked Dusty, "for him to be bringing fish to the pension? And even if he were, wouldn't he have left by the back door?"

Dusty helped her out of the car and said thoughtfully, "Maybe Bill has hired him as a go-between to bring messages to Marie."

"Even so," Vicki argued, "Saint wouldn't come to the front door where Uncle Paul would be sure to intercept the message. That Cajun boy is no dope. He'd smuggle a note in through Sarah."

Before Dusty could reply, the front door suddenly swung open and Uncle Paul stood there under the dim light of the lantern.

"Welcome back, welcome back," he greeted Vicki cordially, his plump face creased in smiles. "I heard your car stopping, Dusty," he said. "I was in my office writing some letters and I said to myself that's our Miss Vicki returning. And how happy my little Marie will be." He took Vicki's overnight kit from Dusty and said, "She's upstairs in her room waiting impatiently for you, chérie."

Vicki thought suspiciously, "Why, he couldn't possibly have heard a car stopping from his office way down at the end of the passageway. He was standing on the other side of the door which he had just closed behind Saint."

She said good night to Dusty and started down the hall to the inside staircase. Could Paul's mysterious visitor, whom she had glimpsed stealthily hurrying away from the pension late Friday evening, have been the barefoot Cajun boy, Saint?

CHAPTER VII

A Broken Date

HALFWAY DOWN THE CORRIDOR VICKI HEARD UNCLE Paul bid Dusty a pleasant "Bonsoir," and then the sound of the heavy door closing and the click of the key in the lock. Now that the dim light from the lantern had been shut off, the tunnel-like passageway was dark except for a faint glow from the moonlit patio at the other end.

For a moment Vicki was almost frightened and felt like wheeling to run and call Dusty back. The house was so gloomy, with its shuttered windows, that it seemed to be brooding over some ancient secret—a secret which it shared only with its owner, Paul Breaux.

The keys jangled at his waist as the plump little gentleman trotted after Vicki. "It is good to have you back, mademoiselle," he said cordially.

With a rather cool "Thank you, it's good to be back" she started up the inside staircase. On the landing she remembered that he had her overnight kit and turned to go back for it. The rubber soles of her only pair of sensible shoes made no sound on the old, worn carpet.

Paul Breaux had turned on the light in his little office just off the patio and was replacing some bills in the metal cashbox on his desk when Vicki entered. "Fifty dollars is a lot of money," she heard him mumble, and then her footsteps tapped on the stone floor of the office. He whirled around to face her and his pale eyes blazed with anger.

Genuinely surprised, she said quickly, "I came back for my kit, Mr. Breaux," and reached out for it.

He snatched it from the little telephone table where he must have dumped it a minute or so ago, and almost threw it at her.

Vicki could not help gasping at such rudeness, and then his whole expression changed. Instantly he was all smiles and Old World courtesy. "Forgive me, mademoiselle," he said with a low bow. "You startled me for a minute. I did not hear you approaching, so absorbed was I in the worry of the money it takes to run a fine pension like this." He shook his head sadly. "The laundry, Sarah's wages, three big meals a day. I make very little profit, mademoiselle."

Vicki, remembering that he had received a large sum of money from the sale of Magnolia Manor, could feel little sympathy for the old gentleman. She managed to smile pleasantly, however, and hurried away. Upstairs, as she passed Marie's room, she stopped. The young girl was weeping as though her heart was broken. Vicki tapped on the door.

The sobs ceased instantly and a timid voice said, "I'm all right, Uncle Paul. I'm sorry if I disturbed you. It's just that I have a headache."

"It's I, Vicki."

Marie hastened to open the door. "Oh, Vicki! Please come in for a moment," she whispered. "I am so unhappy. So very unhappy."

Behind the closed door Vicki impulsively put her arms around little Marie and hugged her. Marie buried her tear-swollen face in Vicki's shoulder.

"It's Bill," she sobbed. "He sent me a note early yesterday morning by a street vendor. I was awakened shortly after you left the pension by the sound of pebbles being thrown against the blinds. When I raised the jalousie, the vendor tossed up a nosegay of spring flowers. Wound around the stems was this letter from Bill."

She handed a tear-stained, crushed piece of paper to Vicki. Hastily scribbled on the letterhead of Bill's small hotel were the words:

"Tea tomorrow at Aunt Julie's. Bill."

"How romantic," Vicki said with a smile. "Dusty told me Bill was going to arrange things so he could see you this afternoon."

"But he didn't show up," Marie wailed. "I spent the whole day with Tante Julie making plans for my party. I waited until six when Uncle Paul sent Sarah to bring me home. But he did not come, Vicki. Something awful must have happened to keep him away. My Bill is not one who breaks an appointment without good reason."

"But, darling," Vicki said soothingly, "something awful *couldn't* have happened to him. And he undoubtedly had a very good reason for not showing up at teatime. When we flew over the plantation yesterday morning I saw the Bug parked off the road below the house. Bill probably had to stay out there all weekend due to some unforeseen development in the work."

Marie shook her head. "If that were true, Vicki, he would have telephoned me at my tante's. A phone was installed in the Magnolia Manor library several months ago. I tell you, Vicki, my Bill is in trouble. I feel it here in my heart."

Vicki had to admit to herself that a courteous young man like Bill would certainly have called Aunt Julie to explain his absence and would never have missed an opportunity to talk over the phone with his fiancée.

"Did you try to reach him at the mansion?" she asked Marie. "And his hotel?"

Marie looked shocked. "Oh, no, Vicki. Uncle Paul has forbidden that I write or telephone him. He would lock me in my room if I did such a thing."

Vicki bit her lip impatiently. "The whole thing is ridiculous and very unfair. And I'll bet your aunt agrees with me."

Marie smiled wanly. "She is very cross with Uncle Paul, but there is nothing she can do. I must obey him, Vicki. I owe him so much." She added with an unexpected show of spirit, rising, Vicki decided, from sheer desperation: "But the two phone numbers are written down in this little blue-and-gold address book. If you should copy them when I am not looking, no one could blame me, could he?"

"No one," Vicki said firmly, and jotted down the telephone numbers of Magnolia Manor and of Bill's hotel on a scrap of paper. Then she marched determinedly out of the room and down the stairs to beard Uncle Paul in his den.

"I'd like to use the phone, please," she said, trying not to sound as belligerent as she felt.

He looked up from the sheaf of bills on his desk and said cordially, "Why, of course, my dear. Ten cents apiece on local calls, and if you will check with the operator after long-distance calls, you may pay promptly or by the week." He turned back to his papers.

"Why, he's going to stay right here," Vicki thought in amazement. "Of all the nerve! Aren't the pension guests allowed to telephone in private?"

There was only one thing to do, and it was something Vicki wanted to do anyway: telephone home, and ask him to leave the room while she talked with her family. But it was not until the call had been put through and Vicki was actually saying, "Hello, hello. Mother? Darling, it's Vicki!" that Mr. Breaux left her alone in the office. And even then he left the door slightly ajar. Vicki was so excited at the sound of her mother's voice that she didn't mind.

"Vicki! How are you?" Mrs. Barr sounded almost as excited.

"Never better. This is the most fascinating city. You and Dad and Ginny must visit it sometime." Vicki stopped to catch her breath. "How is everybody, including Freckles of course?"

"We're all fine, dear," Mrs. Barr replied. "And here's your father."

Vicki told her father that she had sent him some Creole recipes, and he promised to try them as soon as possible. Then Ginny's young voice, rather high-pitched, came over the wire.

"How's the fudge selling?" Vicki asked.

"Not too well," Ginny said mournfully. "I sent you a box yesterday. As a present, Vic."

"No, indeed, honey," Vicki said. "You're in the mail-order business now, as you'll find out when you get my letter tomorrow."

"Mail order?" Ginny gasped.

Vicki explained. "And I've got another order since I wrote. Marie's aunt wants six pounds for a party she's giving next Friday." Vicki chuckled, imagining how Ginny looked as she frantically copied down Mrs. Ewing's name and address. "Why don't you try to get some more mail orders from my friends in New York, honey?" Vicki suggested. "Mrs. Duff, Charmion Wilson, Jean Cox, Dot Crowley, Celia Trimble, Tessa——"

Ginny's voice was a shriek. "Vic! Do you think they'd each buy a box?"

"We-ell. If it's really good."

After a few more words with her parents, Vicki said good-bye all around and hung up. During the three-minute talk she had been transported to her home in Illinois and it was hard to gather her thoughts. She indulged in sixty seconds of homesickness, then picked up the receiver and called Bill Graham's hotel.

"Mr. Graham's not in," the switchboard operator told Vicki.

"Did he leave a message?" Vicki asked. "I mean, do you know where I could reach him?"

The girl lowered her voice to a gossipy half-whisper. "No, I don't, but he certainly left here in a hurry last Friday evening. Around eleven-thirty it was, when I put through that call to Mr. Graham. Whoever it was, was sure worked up about something. At first I couldn't understand a word he said—sounded as though his teeth were chattering or something. I didn't listen in, mind you, but Mr. Graham left right after the connection was broken and he hasn't been back since . . . Oh, here comes the manager. He'll fire me sure as anything for——"

The conversation ended abruptly, and Vicki thought: "Something unforeseen did happen out at Magnolia Manor. The 'worked-up' man who called Bill was probably the watchman, Boots."

Vicki tried the Magnolia Manor number and after a few seconds' wait was told in a cool, impersonal voice that the line was out of order. She had hardly hung up when Mr. Breaux, without knocking, came back into the office. Vicki hastily called the long-distance operator and when she learned the amount of her call home she laid the money, plus an extra dime, on Mr. Breaux's desk.

"Such a dutiful daughter," he said. "Do you call home frequently, mademoiselle?"

Vicki laughed. "I can't afford to feel homesick too often," she said, and slipped past him across the hall and up the stairs. She could feel his eyes staring after her and wondered if he had been listening outside the door while she made all three calls. Vicki shrugged. "If he did, he knows now I'm on Marie and Bill's side, but he was bound to find that out sooner or later, anyway."

Back with Marie, she said, "So now everything is explained. Bill is out at the plantation and he couldn't call because the line is out of order."

The tense sadness fled from Marie's lovely, oval-shaped face. "You are right, Vicki," she murmured. "That's how it was." She clasped her tiny hands. "You think then that I will hear from him soon? Perhaps by the same street vendor early tomorrow morning?"

"I'm practically sure of it," Vicki said. "And now we both must go to bed." She smiled. "If we're both going to be up early tomorrow."

Marie stopped her with a worried frown and Vicki said, a little tiredly, "Darling, you must stop worrying about Bill. That husky young man can take care of himself."

"It is not Bill now, about whom I am thinking. It is my uncle." She twisted her slim fingers in the folds of her light cotton wrapper. "He—sometimes, he acts so strangely. One minute he is gay and affectionate; the next, so cross I run away and burst into tears. Even Sarah cannot make him out, Vicki."

"Oh, he'll get over it," Vicki said with more assurance than she felt. "He's still mad about that silly parlour wall. Once it's torn down, he'll forget about the whole thing."

Marie shivered slightly. "I am not so sure about that, Vicki. Bill told me Friday that he planned to start on the wall tomorrow, but Uncle Paul keeps telling me that they will do nothing of the sort. How can he prevent the work from going on?"

"He can't," Vicki said shortly. "He's just behaving like a spoiled child. Go to sleep and forget about him."

"I must tell you one thing more," Marie whispered. "It was so strange, so unlike Uncle Paul."

Vicki pricked up her ears. "What?"

"It was this way," Marie began nervously. "Yesterday morning, when Sarah and I went to tidy up my uncle's room, we found bits of clay mud on that lovely flowered carpet. And in the closet were Uncle Paul's shoes. They were caked with mud, Vicki, and you know how fastidious my uncle is. Why, he keeps his shoes so polished you can see your face in them, and he cannot abide the sight of a speck of dust in his room. During the Mardi Gras, when the pension was filled with guests, he dusted his room himself. He could not wait for Sarah and me."

Vicki laughed. "That mystery is easy to explain. Your uncle had an early morning business appointment yesterday. Sarah told me so herself. He didn't have time to run the sweeper over the carpet or clean his shoes."

Marie's worried frown changed into a smile. "You are joking, Vicki. My uncle never touched a carpet sweeper in his life. And the only business appointments he ever had were with Mr. Carlisle." Her face lighted suddenly, all of her worries apparently gone. "But don't you see, Vicki? *Everything* is explained now. Mr. Carlisle must be in town and Uncle Paul called on him yesterday morning and persuaded him not to tear down the parlour wall."

"That's the answer," Vicki said with a reassuring smile. But back in her own room, she undressed slowly, wondering: Where had Uncle Paul been on that warm, clear night and bright sunny morning to get mud on his shoes?

CHAPTER VIII

Aunt Julie is Angry

ON HER SECOND FLIGHT TO GUATEMALA CITY ON MONDAY morning, Vicki again peered down at Magnolia Manor through Dusty's binoculars. The little blue Bantam was still parked in the clearing just off the road that dipped down into Dixie Swamp.

"My stars," Vicki scolded herself. "Why didn't I think of it before? Bill probably got stuck in the mud and, with the phone out of order, had to spend the weekend at Magnolia Manor, or walk thirty miles back to town." Old Boots, she remembered, had no means of transportation except the Bug.

But the place was a hive of activity now, with workmen's cars parked along the driveway that circled the mansion, so Vicki decided that Bill would soon be able to get a message to Marie.

Later, when she brought coffee up front to the pilots, she returned Dusty's binoculars and said, "Guess Bill's Bug got mired in the marshy land below Magnolia Manor on Friday night. I saw it there Saturday morning and it's still there now."

"Huh," Dusty said without much interest. "Then he had to taxi back to town to keep his tea date with Marie yesterday?"

Vicki shook her head. "No, he didn't turn up; he must have been marooned out at the plantation all weekend. The phone was out of order."

"Tough luck," Dusty said with a shrug. "But Bill ought to have known better than to drive down the road to the swamp at night. Wonder why a smart guy like that pulled such a dumb trick."

"I think he *had* to drive down that road—or try to," Vicki said. "Something happened at the plantation after you left Bill Friday night. He left his hotel in a hurry around eleven-thirty after a phone call from someone who, my guess is, was old Boots."

Dusty grinned. "Magnolia Manor is to Bill what this ship is to me. It's his baby. He'd dash out there in the dead of night if a faucet in one of his new, tiled bathrooms needed a washer."

Vicki laughed and hurried back to her passengers.

On the return flight Tuesday evening she glanced down as they flew low over Dixie Swamp and noticed that the same light she had seen on Sunday night was still blinking on and off. "Probably a permanent fixture." She yawned, wishing she were curled up in her big bed at the pension. "I guess it's sort of a Cajun signal to warn night travellers away from the quicksand."

It was Sarah who let her into the pension that evening, explaining that M'sieu and Miss Marie had already retired. "M'sieu is away from home so much these days," she said, apologizing. "He has business appointments all day long. I do not understand it, unless he has changed his ways and is paying off his creditors one by one." She locked the heavy front door, grumbling, "And now I must climb the stairs to slip the key under M'sieu's door. He would have nightmares if every one of his precious keys were not in the same room with him."

Vicki had just finished brushing her teeth at the washstand in her room when someone tapped on one of the French doors. It was Marie. She looked so pale, with such dark circles under her eyes that for a moment Vicki thought she must be ill.

"What is it, Marie?" she asked, drawing her inside quickly. "What has happened to you?"

Marie sank down on the bed and buried her face in the pillows. "I have not heard from Bill," she wept. "Not one word. You cannot think up any excuses now, Vicki. Either something dreadful has happened to him or he no longer loves me."

"Neither is true," Vicki said, patting her shoulders. "He probably sent you word by a street vendor who pocketed the tip and threw away the note. Or maybe the vendor was honest and was intercepted by your uncle."

Marie stopped crying and sat up, a little shamefacedly. "Oh, I know you think I'm silly to go on like this, Vicki, but you don't know what it is like to have to stay in the pension all day long. I am not permitted to go to market or to my tante's now. My uncle has said that I must not leave the house unless he himself escorts me, and he is away most of the day."

"I think it's high time," Vicki cried indignantly, "that you called your aunt and asked her to come rescue you."

"I *would* ask her to come see me, I am so very lonely," Marie admitted. "But Uncle Paul keeps the office locked when he is not here, so now even Sarah cannot answer the phone when it rings. It is as though he did not trust me to keep my promise. And he should know, Vicki, that I would not try to write or telephone Bill without his permission."

"Well, *I'm* not afraid of him," Vicki said staunchly. "I'll go wake him up now and get the key so I can call your aunt."

"Oh, no, don't, please," Marie begged. "It would only make him angry with me, and he has been so cross the past two days I can hardly bear it. Besides, it is not necessary. Sarah went to see Tante Julie today and brought me back word that she is coming to lunch tomorrow."

"That's good," Vicki said with relief. "So now your worries are over. Your Aunt Julie will arrange things so you can see Bill during the weekend at her home, if not at the ball on Friday night."

"The ball?" Marie's dark eyes were wide with astonishment. "You know my uncle would never permit Bill to attend the birthday party."

Vicki giggled. "It's going to be a masquerade, isn't it?"

Marie nodded.

"Then why, if your aunt approves, can't Bill come and dance with you until the unmasking?" Vicki grinned mischievously. "And I'm sure she will approve."

Marie jumped up and began to dance around the room. "Oh, Vicki, you are so wonderful! How did I ever live until you came to the pension?"

"You were happy until then," Vicki reminded her. "It seems as though I've brought you bad luck."

"Oh, no, Vicki," Marie cried. "It was not you; it was Mr. Carlisle changing his mind about Magnolia Manor. If only his wife had not found the climate so damp!" She blew a good-night kiss to Vicki and slipped through the French doors to the balcony.

Vicki climbed wearily into bed and fell asleep almost before Marie's light footsteps died away.

In the morning Dusty was waiting for Vicki in front of the pension in his roadster. As they drove through the city to the airport, Vicki said:

"Uncle Paul is really clamping down on poor little Marie. He won't let her stir from the house without him coming along as watchdog."

"That's too bad," Dusty said. "Sounds as though he's afraid she'll disobey and get in touch with Bill."

"Sounds as though he's afraid," Vicki agreed, suddenly suspicious of why Uncle Paul had allowed Marie to visit her aunt on Sunday and had kept her a virtual prisoner ever since. Why had it become so important almost overnight that Marie be prevented from having an opportunity to disobey her uncle? "You know what I think?" Vicki asked Dusty. "I think Uncle Paul intercepted a note from Bill to Marie early Monday morning. Either that, or something happened on Sunday night to make him even stricter with her than usual."

"Could be," Dusty agreed. "Did you ever find out what business he had with that Cajun boy on Sunday evening?"

Vicki laughed ruefully. "I would hardly dare come right out and ask Mr. Breaux why Saint brought fish at nine o'clock to the front door."

Dusty parked the car and, as they started across the field, Captain Jordan came toward them, grinning broadly.

"Hi, you two," he greeted them. "We've got a free day. Flight cancelled on account of weather over the Gulf."

Dusty chuckled with delight. "See, Vicki? Now we'll be here for the ball on Friday. And it's all due to the cat that followed me home last week."

"Or Mme de Fres's onion peels," Vicki replied. "And don't count your chickens before they're hatched. If the weather's still bad tomorrow, we'll spend Friday night in Guatemala City after all."

"You kids run along and catch up on your sightseeing," Captain Jordan said, and added to Dusty, "Call me here every couple of hours. I'll be working around the field most of the day."

"We *could* take in the bayous by helicopter," Dusty said on the way back to town, "except that I happen to know that Dick and Lloyd will be using their 'windmill' all day. Failing that, what would you like to do?"

Vicki thought for a minute. "I'd like to spend the morning catching up on my correspondence," she said. "And in the afternoon, unless Captain Jordan has other plans for us, I'd like to drive through the suburbs and see some of the famous plantations around here. Maybe even Magnolia Manor."

"Sold," Dusty said, slowing to a stop in front of the Breaux pension. "I'll pick you up after lunch. Around two?"

"Fine."

Vicki was surprised when, after waiting several minutes, Sarah answered her knock. She had gathered that Mr. Breaux spent most of the day away from home. But she had not expected to find him gone so early.

"M'sieu has returned to his old habit of sleeping late," Sarah said with a smile. "I had to awaken him just now to get the key. As cross as a bear disturbed in midwinter, he was. What a vile temper that man is developing in his old age! I tell him I'll put him on a gruel and milk-toast diet if he doesn't watch out."

"I'm sorry I disturbed him, Sarah," Vicki said quite untruthfully. "The flight was cancelled so I have an unexpected free day."

"Good, good," Sarah said approvingly. "Then you will be here for lunch when Miss Julie comes. I went to see her yesterday to tell her I will not put up with M'sieu's whims any longer. I don't mind how much he snaps at me because he is having trouble with his digestion. But when he scolds my little Marie every time he sets eyes on her, it is too much." She bustled away to the kitchen, and Vicki went up to her room.

She slipped out of her uniform and into a blue linen frock. Then she wrote a letter to her mother and one to Mrs. Duff, the cheerful, pink-cheeked housekeeper who ran the apartment in New York which Vicki shared with five other stewardesses.

"Prepare the girls for begging notes from my little sister, Ginny," Vicki wrote. "She's gone into the mail-order business, selling home-made fudge."

Sarah interrupted then, bringing Vicki a stack of letters and a battered-looking package addressed in Ginny's rather sprawling hand. Vicki opened it promptly and tasted Ginny's product, first offering a piece to Sarah.

"Why, it's delicious," Vicki cried in amazement. "What do you think of it, Sarah?"

Sarah licked her lips. "It's the best fudge I ever tasted, Miss Vicki. I'd like to buy a box for myself. Please give me your little sister's address, so I can write her and order a couple of pounds."

When Sarah had gone, Vicki pounced on her mail. First she read the long letter from her mother, enclosed with which were notes from Professor Barr and Ginny. Then she opened a thick envelope addressed in the handwriting of Charmion Wilson, the young, fair-haired widow. It was a "round robin" signed by all five of the girls, and Vicki could almost see their faces as she laughed over the lines each one had written; Red-haired Dot, dark and dramatic Tessa, Celia, Jean, and Charmion.

Vicki missed her stewardess friends and promptly replied to their "round robin" with a long P.S. which she added on to the letter she had begun to Mrs. Duff. When she had finished, she looked up to find Marie standing on the balcony side of the wide open French doors, staring at her wistfully.

"It must be nice to get so many letters," she said. "I didn't want to interrupt, Vicki, but my tante is here. She wishes to speak to you about the costume you will wear at my birthday ball."

"Oh, my goodness," Vicki cried. "I'm not at all sure I'll be here, Marie."

"But Dusty said," Marie argued, "that if you were grounded for one day, you might." She smiled, blushing a little. "Tante just explained to me what grounded meant. And she does not mind at all making a costume for you, even though you may never wear it. She is very clever with her fingers, and there are yards and yards of all kinds of material in the chest down in the locked parlour."

"You're both awfully sweet," Vicki said, stamping the last of her letters. "And I accept with pleasure."

As the girls came down the stairs to the patio, Aunt Julie called up:

"It is good to see you again, Vicki. Like Dusty, I have kept my fingers crossed ever since we met last Friday." She held out her plump, beringed hands, chuckling. "See? Comme ça."

Vicki laughed. "And now you are going to uncross them to make me a fancy-dress costume?" She dropped a little curtsy. "I appreciate it very much, Aunt Julie."

The pretty little lady shrugged away Vicki's thanks. "It is nothing. I have made so many costumes in my day I could whip up one for you with my eyes shut. Come closer, chérie. Yes, I have decided. You shall go as a fairy princess in silvery tulle that will blend with your hair and make you look as though you were made of star dust." She raised her voice, almost shouting:

"Paul, Paul! Come fetch me the keys to the parlour. And don't try to tell me that you are busy, for I know that you are occupied in there with nothing more useful than a game of solitaire, and cheating yourself at that!" Her black eyes twinkled at Vicki. "It is not a kind thing to say to one's brother, is it? But I am very angry with Paul for the way he has been behaving lately."

Vicki kept her thoughts to herself, and Uncle Paul almost immediately came out of his office into the courtyard. He was frowning, and Vicki couldn't help wondering if it was because the sun was shining in his eyes or because he was vexed by his sister's taunt.

He said pleasantly enough, "Come, come, Julie. If you were a man I would challenge you to a duel behind the cathedral for that. Why do you wish the key to the parlour?"

Aunt Julie tapped her small foot impatiently on the flagstones under her rocker. "Do not boast, mon frère, you are too much of a coward to challenge even a dwarf to a duel. Hand me the key. I wish to open the chest which by rights is mine since it came from our mother's side of the family. I do not know why I let it remain in your stuffy old parlour where no one ever sees the beautiful carving. Hand me that key, Paul."

The old gentleman's frown deepened, and Vicki was sure he was going to refuse.

Then suddenly he made his sister a courtly bow and removed a key from the ring at his waist. "Here you are, little sister," he said, "and do not blame me, chérie, if you find the materials in the chest rumpled and tarnished. You yourself ransacked it twice during the Mardi Gras, in case you have forgotten. *I* have not touched the contents for years."

Aunt Julie tossed her dark, curly hair. "Then if I was the last one to open the chest, mon ami, everything will be in order. I am twice as neat as you are, and not half so lazy." She rose and swept past him into the house.

Vicki and Marie followed, but Uncle Paul stopped Marie by the patio entrance. "Your aunt is very cross with me, Marie," Vicki heard him say in a low voice. "Have you been whining to her?"

Marie gasped. "Oh, no, Uncle Paul. I have nothing to complain about except that you have been away so much during the past few days."

Uncle Paul clucked and said almost under his breath as Marie scurried after Vicki, "Then it's Sarah. That fool woman never could mind her own business."

Vicki turned and looked back as Aunt Julie unlocked the folding doors to the parlour. There was something so menacing in the angry expression on Paul Breaux's fat face that Vicki almost felt like running to the kitchen to warn Sarah.

"He's furious," Vicki thought, "but, thank goodness, he's too afraid of his sister to do anything really cruel." And she shuddered to think of what Marie's life might be like if it were not for her aunt Julie.

CHAPTER IX

In the Locked Parlour

VICKI AND MARIE, ONE ON EACH SIDE, PUSHED BACK THE folding doors of the immense salon. Aunt Julie, groping in the semi-darkness, reached in to turn on the electrically lighted chandeliers which hung from the ceiling. The beautiful old parlour sprang to life.

"Raise the blinds, mes belles," Aunt Julie ordered and explained to Vicki, "They are always kept tightly drawn against the sun and air so the rugs and furniture will not fade." She pattered after Marie, unlocking from the inside and opening the French doors to the patio. Gradually, as the fresh morning sunlight flooded the room, the musty odour died away.

Vicki, awed, stared at the richly carved rosewood furniture and the massive marble fireplace with the huge gilt-framed mirror that hung above it. The mantelpiece was cluttered with bric-a-brac, porcelain vases, statuettes of bronze and ivory, and on either side hung portraits painted in oil. One of them was of a beautiful young lady with flaxen hair and cornflower-blue eyes, but she looked so much like Marie that Vicki guessed at once who she was.

Marie stood beneath the portrait for several minutes, gazing wistfully up at her mother's face.

"Ca m'enquiquine!" Aunt Julie whispered loudly to Vicki. "That makes me boil. The pauvre petite! My brother would not give the child a key so she could go in and out when she pleased. And now Sarah tells me she is not permitted to leave the pension unless he himself escorts her. That, chérie, will have to be stopped. I promise you, je vais lui foutre un galop. I'll get after him!"

"I hope you do," Vicki said heartily. "And don't you agree with me that Bill should come to the ball Friday and stay until the unmasking?"

"That I do," Aunt Julie agreed. "I'll drop him a note telling him that I shall expect him at nine sharp. That means he can dance with his little Cinderella until supper is served at midnight."

Marie turned away from the portrait, her small face alight. "Oh, Tante, that will be heavenly. It may be the last time I'll ever see Bill."

"Fiddlesticks!" Aunt Julie clenched her hands into plump fists. "You will be eighteen on Friday, mon petit chou, and after that we shall see what we shall see. Alors, chérie, we must open the chest and see to Vicki's costume."

When they lifted the ornately-carved lid, Aunt Julie bent over and began rummaging through the carefully folded materials of velvet, satin, metal cloth of gold and silver and bronze. In one section were stacked finished costumes: dominoes, witches' cloaks, clowns' pantaloons, hula skirts, Indian headdresses and elaborate trains for king and queen of hearts costumes. There were masks and false faces of all sizes and descriptions, huge feathered fans, crowns, sceptres, and a box overflowing with gaudy paste jewellery.

"We Creoles," Aunt Julie told Vicki, "like nothing better than a fancy-dress party." She chuckled and drew out a multi-coloured jester's costume, complete with belled cap and wand. "This is what my brother shall wear to the birthday ball, buffoon that he is! And there is not another like it in the city, for I stitched every strip of it together with my own hands." She shook out the folds. "See, Vicki, there is every colour in the rainbow here."

"It's a regular patchwork quilt," Vicki said admiringly. "It must have taken you a year to make it."

"Mais, non," Aunt Julie corrected her. "With Sarah's help, only a few days. She is good at basting, that one. Ah," she finished, triumphantly lifting out a bolt of silvery tulle. "This is what I have been looking for, and why such fragile material was tucked 'way down at the bottom I'll never know."

Unfolding the bolt, her competent little hands were soon draping the diaphanous cloth around Vicki's slim body. "A tuck here, and a dart there," she mumbled, her mouth full of the pins Marie had brought her. "The skirt must be long and full and the hemline cut into a hundred little points. Ma foi!" she exclaimed suddenly, and Vicki thought she must have swallowed a pin. "This tulle has shrunk. I was sure there was enough here for a skirt several yards wide."

Vicki laughed, looking down. "It's plenty wide enough, Aunt Julie. I couldn't get through a door if it were any fuller."

The plump little lady clucked with dissatisfaction. "It will have to do. Over Marie's white taffeta slip the effect will be good, but not as I would have liked it. Now, try on this crown, chérie, and look at yourself in the mirror."

Vicki tucked her head under the passementerie headdress which was embroidered with pearls and bright-coloured beads, and Marie draped a wide girdle to match around her slender waist. Vicki looked at her reflection in the gilt-framed mirror and was both surprised and pleased. Marie crowed with delight and her aunt nodded and chuckled as Vicki pirouetted around the huge room.

"It's going to be perfectly lovely," she cried. "I feel like a fairy princess already." She grinned. "Now to burn some onion peels so we can be sure I'll be here for the ball."

"Madame is doing that for you," Aunt Julie assured her with a gay laugh. "Her great niece is getting married this week, and she is doing everything to be sure it will be a happy marriage. Ma foi, how that fool woman can talk! She cornered me in the patio before you came down, Vicki, and told me the life history of each one of the bridegroom's ancestors."

Marie nodded. "I love Madame very much, but it takes so long to clean her apartment! And then Uncle Paul scolds me for not getting my work done." She added timidly, changing the subject, "Do you think, Tante, that for a birthday present I could have a photograph taken of my mother's portrait? Just a small one which I could wear in my gold locket. Madame, who is very good with water colours, said she would tint it for me. She saw my mother often, although she never spoke to her."

"Never spoke to her!" Vicki was astonished. "Why on earth not?"

"Because," Aunt Julie exclaimed in exasperation, "the beautiful Martha Freeman was not a Creole. Like my uncle Etienne, Madame, in those days, thought it was a disgrace to la famille if anyone married out of the circle. But she, too, has changed, as Etienne himself did."

Vicki pricked up her ears. "Oh! So Marie's great-uncle eventually regretted that he had disinherited her father? It seemed to me very unfair of him to make out that second will."

The brisk little lady shrugged. "Well, I can't go as far as saying that Etienne was ashamed of that second will, but he should have been. For, not many years after my brother Adrian married Martha Freeman, Etienne himself married out of the Creole circle, a very efficient lady from Boston." She sat down on the top of the chest which they had just finished repacking. "It is a long story, Vicki, and you will find it boring, non?"

Vicki promptly sat down beside her. "On the contrary, I'd love to hear it. Everything connected with Magnolia Manor fascinates me. Dusty half promised to drive me out there after lunch. If he does, I hope Bill will show us through the mansion."

Marie curled up on a petit point footstool at their feet. "If you see my Bill, Vicki, you will bring back a message from him to me?" Vicki nodded, and Marie looked up at her aunt: "I, too, would like to hear more about my great-uncle and his wife. I only knew that he married very late in life, and that she had been his housekeeper."

"She started out as that," Aunt Julie told them. "One summer, when my brothers spent their vacations at the plantation, Etienne, a middle-aged bachelor, hired Mrs. Ford to keep an eye on them and to run the house. I, as a small child, remained at home in this very pension, but I learned later from the servants that the spinster tantes and cousines, as well as the widows, like Madame, who is a very distant relative, were very angry when Etienne hired Mrs. Ford instead of one of them, as was the custom."

"Why didn't he stick to the customs in that case?" Vicki demanded out of curiosity.

"I can only guess," Marie's tante said with a shrug. "Although at that time he was as much of a gentleman loafer as my brother is now, I think that deep down inside he was not really lazy, and could not endure the slipshod ways of his tantes and cousins who left everything to the servants. I say that," she went on, "although I hardly knew him, but in the end, the Lady from Boston made him roll up his sleeves and work with his hands. She was evidently an extremely frugal woman and was shocked by the waste of the vast plantation, and urged Etienne to cultivate the cotton fields and the rice bottoms. Before that first summer was over, she convinced him, and so stayed on as what you might call 'a lady overseer'."

"I did not know any of this, Tante," Marie exclaimed. "How old was my father then?"

"Let me see." Aunt Julie pursed her full red lips. "I must have been about three, so Adrian was ten, and Paul a young dandy of eighteen. The plantation prospered with Mrs. Ford in charge, and my brothers spent many happy summers there. Then, the year of my debut, Adrian announced his intentions of marrying that great beauty, Martha Freeman. It was a good match in every way, for her father was a rich banker, but Etienne, as I have told you, did not approve. He was the head of the family then, for my parents died when I was sixteen and left us all to the care of my own tante Titine. She, as well as Mrs. Ford, approved of the marriage, but Etienne quarrelled with Adrian and it was then that he made out a second will, leaving everything to Paul."

"Why didn't he leave anything to you in either of the wills?" Vicki wanted to know.

"Because I was a girl," Aunt Julie said with a chuckle. "Young Creole ladies were supposed to get married and be taken care of by their husbands. If they were not so fortunate, their brothers were morally bound to keep them in their homes, as unpaid housekeepers and governesses. Me, I did not care, for I was already engaged by then and was married shortly after Adrian's wedding. He did not care much either, although he was fond of Uncle Etienne, for he was in love with his Martha and starting out in a new business. So what did it matter to him whether he inherited half of that old plantation or not?"

"I still think it was wrong of Etienne Breaux to disinherit Marie's father," Vicki said staunchly. "If he hadn't changed his will, half of the money Marie's uncle got from the sale of Magnolia Manor would belong to her, wouldn't it?"

"As Adrian's sole heir, yes," Aunt Julie admitted. "But my brother died a few months after Marie was born. Etienne was still clinging to the old Creole traditions at that time, so he might well have changed his will in order that Marie, a girl, could not inherit any of his real property. Paul, you see, was his only remaining male heir, and it must have broken old Etienne's heart to leave that prosperous plantation to such a fainéant."

"I somehow can't believe he meant to," Vicki said, more to herself than to the others. "When did he marry the Lady from Boston and what finally made him give up the Creole traditions?"

"He married the good woman," Aunt Julie said, "when I was abroad on my honeymoon. My husband was an importer, you see, and we spent several years travelling all over Europe after our wedding. I have no idea exactly when or how much Etienne changed during that time. I only know that he always vastly admired the Lady from Boston, as Adrian and I did. Not so Paul, he hated her and she despised him; they quarrelled incessantly."

Vicki thought for a minute. "There's something very odd about all this," she said. "After Etienne Breaux's marriage to Mrs. Ford, why didn't he make out a third will leaving everything to his wife, as most men do?"

"Because," Marie's tante said a trifle impatiently, "as I keep telling you, Etienne was not like most men. He would never have left Magnolia Manor to anyone but a male heir."

"Surely he made some provision for his wife," Vicki said. "If for no other reason than that it was mainly due to her efforts that the plantation had become profitable."

"He undoubtedly *meant* to do something of the sort," Aunt Julie said mildly, "and especially since he knew how much Paul and his wife disliked each other. I myself was rather surprised that Etienne did not add a codicil to his will stating that the income from the plantation should go to the Lady from Boston until her death. But you see, chérie, they both died shortly after the marriage. One evening, during a heavy rain, they paddled their pirogue through the bayous to inspect the new drainage system they had recently installed——"

"And they never came back," Marie finished sadly. "I would like to have known them both, but I was barely two at that time."

"Well, you did know them in a way," her aunt told her. "Sarah told me on my return to this country that your uncle brought you out there more than once. You were a very pretty baby, chérie, and I suspect he could not resist showing you off and perhaps borrowing a little something from Etienne for your cod-liver oil and first short dresses."

"Oh, but, Tante," Marie objected, "my great-uncle would never have given anyone a penny for me after the bitter quarrel he had with my father."

"I am not so sure of that." Aunt Julie got up and began to close and lock the French doors, and Vicki helped Marie draw the blinds. "Etienne was very fond of children, especially pretty ones. I hope I do not sound vain but he adored me, and I was made ill more than once on bonbons he stuffed me with." She pointed to an enormous diamond in one of the many rings on her fingers. "He gave me this on my eighteenth birthday and the necklace and the tiara to match. They shall be yours, ma petite, on Friday, as well as the emerald set he gave me for a wedding present."

Marie, almost overwhelmed with gratitude, could only throw her arms around her aunt, crying, "I will not accept them, Tante. They look so lovely on you, and where could I ever appear in them? I, who never go anywhere."

"All that will be changed in due time," Aunt Julie said firmly. "Until your eighteenth birthday I could do nothing except buy you a pretty dress or two and pay for your education. If I had given you anything more valuable than your little gold locket, your uncle might have taken it away and sold it. I do not like to say this in front of you, a stranger, Vicki, but I no longer feel that you *are* a stranger. And I am so angry with Paul for the way he has behaved since the scene he made at dinner last Friday, I do not care if the whole world knows what I think of him. He is like a greedy little piglet who thinks of nothing but himself." She pulled the folding doors together with a thud and locked them. "I wish with all my heart that Etienne had disinherited him instead of my dear brother Adrian."

Back in the patio Aunt Julie settled herself in a rocker and continued loudly expressing her opinion of Paul:

"He is not only greedy but stupid. If he had had any sense he would somehow have kept the plantation going after the will was probated. It is true that when all debts had been paid by the executor there was very little money left, for Etienne had invested his savings in the new drainage system. But Paul could have raised funds with a mortgage or two, the idiot! My husband would have considered it an excellent investment, for Magnolia Manor was a paying proposition in those days. But non, Paul only wanted to be rid of it, lock, stock, and barrel. It was already in the hands of a real-estate broker when we returned from abroad, and the fertile cotton fields and rice bottoms in a frightful state with the expensive drains beyond repair."

"Such a frightful waste," Vicki said. "I can't understand it."

"You would if you understood Paul." The brisk little lady fluttered her hands and her jewels sparkled in the midday sunlight. "He is so lacking in imagination he even cheats himself. And he is as stubborn as a mule. Even as things were when we inspected the plantation, my husband would have bought it and hired an overseer to run it for him, if only Paul would show him the books. One does not invest a lot of money in a business without first knowing the profit and loss situation, does one?"

Vicki nodded in agreement. "Why wouldn't your brother show your husband the books?"

The beringed hands fluttered like jewelled butterflies. "Because he is so proud and vain he did not want me or mon mari to find out what a lazy fool he had been to let that prosperous plantation go to ruin. He gave as his excuse that there were no books, no records of any kind; in fact, he could not even find the original of that second will. I asked our lawyer about that—he had one copy, Paul the other—and he said that all the papers must have been destroyed during a small fire that broke out in the servants' quarters during the wedding celebrations."

"Why, that's ridiculous," Vicki couldn't help exclaiming. "Important papers wouldn't have been kept in that part of the house, would they?"

Aunt Julie shrugged. "That's what I told the lawyer, and I also told him that if all the records had been burned, I, for one, had no doubt as to who had set a match to them. But the good gentleman did not agree with me, and informed me that it was the Lady from Boston who had kept the plantation books, and the old sewing-room on the second floor in the rear, where the house slaves once slept, had been her office. It was in the room across the hall that the fire broke out, and, supposedly, in the confusion, many things were lost or destroyed unnecessarily." She rose to her feet, panting from the exertion. "But neither my husband nor I was taken in by such nonsense. We knew perfectly well that the astute Lady from Boston would have kept the records in the old family strong-box, if she kept them at all. And it was Paul, fearing criticism for his profligacy, who lost or destroyed them. *And* the strong-box. Alors, Marie, we must leave Vicki to rest now while we go help the bonne Sarah with lunch. My old tongue has wagged more this morning than that of Mme de Fres."

Vicki offered to help but was told sternly that it would be a busman's holiday if a flight stewardess on her free day was even allowed to set the table.

After they had gone, Vicki sat in the shade of the tall palm tree, listening to the murmur of the fountain and thinking:

"Aunt Julie is right, Uncle Paul did lose or destroy those papers, but not for the reason she suspects. He did not want the original of that second will to be found, for I am sure that Etienne Breaux changed the terms of that will before his death."

She counted on her fingers, mentally listing her reasons: First, because he must have eventually regretted disinheriting Adrian for doing the same thing he himself eventually did: marrying a non-Creole. Second, because Etienne must have changed considerably during his last years to have married the Lady from Boston; and it is almost certain that he shed the tradition that had formerly made him feel he must leave Magnolia Manor to no one but his sole male heir. Third, in that case, he must have made out a new will, or added a codicil to the second will, leaving everything to his wife, not to his indolent nephew Paul, whom the Lady from Boston despised. Fourth, what better way of making amends for his injustice to Adrian than to state in the codicil, or new will, that at the death of his wife the property should go to Marie?

"Now, don't let your imagination run away with you," Vicki counselled herself. "Those papers *may* have been destroyed in the fire after all, and Etienne Breaux *may* have planned to change his will but, busy with plantation matters, didn't get around to it before his death."

She stared drowsily at the fountain, babbling in the sunshine, and suddenly the fountain seemed to be whispering to her:

"Come up, mademoiselle, come up into my apartment, and let us have a gumbo ya-ya, you and I."

Vicki jerked into wide-awakeness and glanced up at the lacy balcony overhead. Peering down at her was the tiny wrinkled face of Mme de Fres. She beckoned with her frail, withered hands and whispered:

"I only pretend I do not speak English because I prefer the language of my ancestors. I did not mean to eavesdrop, but with my doors open I could not help overhearing what you and Mme Ewing were discussing. I know something about Etienne Breaux's will which might interest you. Come up, mademoiselle; I assure you, you will not be bored by what I have to say."

CHAPTER X

Mme de Fres's Story

MADAME, VICKI SOON DISCOVERED, SPOKE PERFECT English, and unlike Marie's aunt and the young Cajun couple did not confuse her by switching back and forth between French and English. She was, however, a long time coming to the point, and Vicki was sure she would suffocate in the heavy atmosphere of the overcrowded parlour before the name Breaux came into the conversation.

"We Creoles," Mme de Fres informed her in all seriousness, "are descendants of Jupiter, and as such, we speak only the truth. I, Marie Josephine St. Paul de Fres, swear to you that what I have to say is the gospel truth. I have never repeated it to another living soul, for a Creole does not go back on the ties of his blood."

Vicki nodded soberly but suspected that whatever information Madame was going to impart had already been repeated to any number of no longer living tantes and cousines in many a lengthy gumbo ya-ya.

Madame patted her thin knot of white hair and continued: "I was a great belle in my day, mademoiselle, and when I was even younger than you I was mistress of a great mansion, larger and more luxurious than Magnolia Manor ever will be. I burned many things and planted a pepper bush in the garden, but still bad luck came. I knew it would, for one night I dreamed that my smooth skin was covered with moles. First, my husband died, and then my children, and after that, one by one, my brothers and sisters, until at last there was no one left but me to bear the proud names of St. Paul and de Fres. And with my family went our vast plantations and our exquisite homes in the Vieux Carré. I was growing old and feeble, and my distant cousin, Paul Breaux, was becoming impoverished, so I invested what was left of my money in government bonds and, with the interest, I offered to rent from him this apartment."

Vicki glanced around her and thought that a great deal of the St. Paul and de Fres heirlooms must have been crammed into this one room.

Madame leaned forward a little and lowered her whispery old voice. "That was after Etienne Breaux died, mademoiselle. I was still mistress of my own home then, and when Paul let the house servants go I hired old Theodore, my favourite, to come and be my major-domo. A devoted and excellent servant he was, until the day he died, and never tired of telling me of his master's wedding to that Lady from Boston, and what a bad omen it was that a fire broke out that very night in the old slave quarters on the second floor of the mansion."

"Did you go to the wedding, Madame?" Vicki asked politely.

The old lady's veined lids drooped, and her thin lips drew into a pout. "I was not invited, I, who was one of Etienne's oldest friends, although Paul, with whom he had quarrelled violently only a fortnight before the ceremony, was there."

Vicki's interest was suddenly re-awakened. She had been inwardly chuckling that the fire which had been such a bad omen to the marriage had probably been caused by someone burning something to bring good luck. Now it was her turn to lean forward and lower her voice. "Did Paul quarrel with his uncle, madame?"

"So Theodore told me," the wispy lady declared. "Theo told me that his master, getting on in life, asked his nephew to come out and help him run the plantation. Paul, a popular young gallant in his early thirties, flatly refused. There was a stormy scene in the library which even old Theo could hear 'way back in the butler's pantry. He did not listen, of course, but he could tell by the sound of their voices that they were arguing hotly. But to get back to the wedding, to which I was not invited because, I am quite sure, the Lady from Boston never liked me. The feeling was mutual, I assure you. Imagine Etienne hiring her as his housekeeper instead of one of his impoverished lady cousins!"

"To get back to the wedding?" Vicki repeated gently.

"Ah, yes." Mme de Fres sighed reminiscently. "Old Theo said it was a beautiful, although a very small affair. The parlour was brilliantly lighted with a thousand candles and after the ceremony Etienne called Theo and the other house servants into the library to witness his signature on the bottom of a long piece of parchment."

Vicki's heart began to race and she could hardly conceal her excitement as Madame went on: "Now this is the part you will find interesting, mademoiselle. Theo and the other servants thought that the document was merely an unusually elaborate wedding certificate and, without glancing at the fine handwriting, signed where their master indicated. Paul also signed, but I imagine he knew what he was doing. For I have never had the slightest doubt, mademoiselle, that what they were witnessing was Etienne's signature on a codicil, changing his will in favour of that Mrs. Ford!" She leaned back triumphantly.

"But, madame," Vicki asked in astonishment, "why didn't you tell the family lawyer what you knew?"

The tiny old lady shrugged her shoulders. "I am not one to stir up trouble without good and sufficient reason. If my good friend, Paul Breaux, did not mention the matter, why should I? The codicil undoubtedly stated that at Mrs. Ford's death, or in the event of a common disaster to them both, Magnolia Manor would revert to Paul. The disaster occurred less than a week after the wedding, so everything remained as it had been before the codicil was added." She smiled. "And that is my secret, mademoiselle. I would not reveal it now except that it no longer matters. Magnolia Manor has been sold and Paul has the money. Even if the original will with the codicil should turn up, it would change nothing."

"I'm not so sure of that," Vicki said thoughtfully, and added, "Then you don't think the will was lost in the fire, madame?"

A mysterious look flitted into Mme de Fres's pale eyes. "Do not quote me, mademoiselle, but this even you must know yourself. Most of those old mansions were built with secret hiding places. Family valuables were hidden there when northern troops occupied the city during the Civil War. Often they were nothing but a crevice in a wall, sometimes a small room, but always hard to find. Let us give my good friend, Paul, credit for having searched for such a hiding place to no avail."

Not me! Vicki thought, and then abruptly changed her mind. Paul undoubtedly *did* search for the original will, planning to destroy it, but he never found it.

And now at last things were beginning to make sense. *A crevice in a wall, or a small room! Always hard to find.* No wonder Paul Breaux had been a changed man since Bill had dropped the bombshell that the wall between the old locked parlour and the library was to be torn down! The will must be hidden somewhere in that wall, and there could be no doubt now that the codicil Paul himself had witnessed had revoked the second will, this time disinheriting Paul. Otherwise, he would have no reason for being in such terror for fear the secret hiding place of the old family strongbox would be found when the wall was torn down.

Madame's voice brought her back to the present. "The bell, mademoiselle. They are calling us to lunch."

Vicki was so absorbed with her thoughts she hardly knew what she was eating.

It was maddening to realize that Paul could not be exposed until the will turned up, for Vicki had no proof whatsoever, and even Madame's testimony would be thrown out as hearsay in a court of law. It had become a race between Paul and Bill—with Bill badly handicapped because he did not even know he was running a race. Who would find the will first?

Then she was struck by another thought that made her feel for a while that she must have been letting her imagination run away with her. Why hadn't the secret hiding place in the wall already been found if the demolition job had begun on Monday morning? Today was Wednesday. Surely it didn't take more than two days to tear down an old wall.

Then she realized that it might take weeks, for they would have to work slowly and carefully in order to avoid marring the rest of the house which had already been redecorated.

She glanced out of the corner of one eye at Paul, smugly presiding at the head of his table as though he hadn't a care in the world. Did this abrupt return to his former good humour mean that he had already won the race? No, he was merely playing a part. Vicki remembered how menacingly angry he had looked when Aunt Julie was unlocking the parlour door that morning; and now she was sure that he had not yet found the will—nor had anybody else.

It was easy to guess what "business" appointments had kept Paul away from home so much since the dinner party last Friday, but how could he search for the will with Boots at Magnolia Manor nights and week-ends, and Bill and the day crew on the premises at other times?

Who was his mysterious visitor Friday evening? What had the two been talking about in the pension parlour? And how did the Cajun boy, Saint, fit into the picture? Vicki could now understand Paul's out-of-character display of sentiment at the mere suggestion that Magnolia Manor was to be converted into a night club, and his unreasonable attitude toward Bill.

But she could only guess the reason why Paul had not, at the time of his uncle's death, systematically searched for the will and destroyed it. His character must be the answer. For he was, as his sister kept saying, lazy, stupid, and so unimaginative that he often cheated himself. He had probably decided when he turned the property over to a real-estate dealer that if *he* could not find the will nobody else could. And nobody else had looked for it, since it had been taken for granted that all the important papers had been burned in the fire.

Vicki thought back to what she knew about Paul's boyhood and the summers he had spent at the plantation. He must have learned from his uncle that there was a secret hiding place in the old mansion and, as any boy would, had tried to find it. She could almost see him and his younger brother, Adrian, poking into all the obvious places and finally coming to the conclusion that the entrance to the hiding place must be in the traditionally locked parlour.

Later, when Paul was master of Magnolia Manor, he could, of course, have torn down the wall, but that would hardly have enhanced the value of the house which he hoped to sell lock, stock, and barrel for a large sum of money. And so it was his own greediness that had got him into the difficulty he was in now—his greediness, and his lack of imagination that had prevented him from foreseeing that any future owner of Magnolia Manor might eventually discover that will with Paul's signature on it.

Vicki was suddenly brought back into the general conversation by a casual remark of Aunt Julie's. "Mon frère," she said to her brother, "surely you remember that bolt of silvered tulle I bought during the Mardi Gras?"

Paul's heaped-high fork stopped halfway to his mouth and the food slid back into his plate. "No, Julie," he said slowly, "I do not remember it at all."

His sister shrugged. "It doesn't matter except that the store must have cheated me. I paid for several more yards than I brought home, for there is hardly enough to make Vicki a decent costume. I am twice her size and I planned to make myself a fancy dress out of it." She chuckled. "In the end, I put it on top of the other materials in the chest, for I grew so sick of balls and parades I could not bear the sight of it."

"I remember very well, Miss Julie," Sarah said from her position behind Paul's chair. "I myself wrapped the bolt in black tissue paper so it would not tarnish."

"So you did, Sarah," Aunt Julie said, mildly scolding, "but when you packed things away after the last ball you placed that bolt at the bottom with no wrapping at all."

Sarah snorted indignantly. "I did nothing of the sort, Miss Julie. How can you believe that I would place such fragile goods underneath those heavy velvets and metal cloths?"

The front door knocker sounded then, and Sarah, holding her turbaned head high with outraged dignity, marched out of the room.

Aunt Julie burst into a peal of merry laughter. "That Sarah! She is only a year older than I and yet she contradicts me as though I were a small child."

Paul said in a voice that was almost a growl, "She is getting out of hand, that one. Impertinent and meddling, and now you have caught her in a lie. I shall give her notice this very afternoon."

Marie's small face turned pale. "Notice to Sarah, Uncle Paul? Oh, you couldn't. You couldn't."

"You have nothing to say in the matter," Paul snapped at her.

"Ah, but *I* have, mon frère," Aunt Julie put in evenly. "And I tell you now, Paul Breaux, Sarah stays here for as long as she likes, do you understand?"

Paul's eyes shifted away from her and he mumbled, "It is the lie I object to, Julie. If she had admitted packing that chest badly——"

Aunt Julie interrupted with a rapid flow of French, and Madame listened avidly, licking her thin lips. Vicki could only catch two words, "cartes" and "scandale," but she could guess the rest. At some time in his life Paul Breaux had been caught cheating at cards and it was Aunt Julie's influence and money that had prevented a scandal.

Paul's face turned red then white and Marie looked so shocked Vicki thought she was going to faint. She jumped up suddenly and, with her hands over her ears, ran out of the room, almost colliding with Dusty and Sarah as they came in from the corridor.

Dusty stood on the threshold staring after Marie, but Sarah brushed by him, her skirts rustling as she hurried to catch up with the now sobbing Marie.

Vicki heard them going slowly up the stairs together, Sarah crooning, "Never mind, ma petite, never mind. Your Sarah is here and she will not let anything happen to her bébé."

It was Aunt Julie's tact and ease that ended the tense situation. She beckoned to Dusty with her plump little hand. "Come here, you young rascal, and let me wash your face. As usual, you have chocolate on your chin."

Dusty laughed and bent down to let Aunt Julie dab at his immaculate face with her napkin which she dipped in her finger bowl. While this was going on, Paul silently pushed back his chair and left the room, rather like a whipped dog, Vicki thought.

"Alors," Aunt Julie said, just as though nothing unusual had happened. "Now, mon petit chou, you look almost like a gentleman. Are you taking our Vicki out to see the plantation?"

"If that's what she wants to see," Dusty said, grinning at Vicki.

"*If you only knew how much I want to see it,*" Vicki thought, and said aloud, "I can hardly wait. Just let me run upstairs to say good-bye to Marie."

Aunt Julie stopped her with a gesture. "Mais non, chérie, this is a family matter. It is better that you remain away from the pension for the afternoon. When you return all will be well again, I assure you."

Vicki could only obey. It was, after all, none of her business. But it *was* very much Bill's business, and she intended to tell him her suspicions as soon as possible and to start him on the road to winning the race against Paul.

CHAPTER XI

Magnolia Manor

ONCE THEY WERE IN THE CAR AND DRIVING TOWARD the outskirts of town, Dusty said, "Say, what goes on back there at the Breaux pension, Vic? I felt as though I'd arrived a minute before the murder!"

"You'd be right," Vicki told him, "if thoughts were weapons. And the whole thing started because a bolt of silvery tulle wasn't where it was supposed to be." She explained, finishing with:

"Did you ever hear any scandal about Paul Breaux cheating at cards?"

Dusty thought for a minute. "Well, I remember Dad saying about a year ago that he had resigned from one of his clubs. I thought it was probably because he couldn't afford to pay his dues, but maybe he was asked to resign."

"I'll bet that was it," Vicki said emphatically. "The idea of that dishonest old man threatening to fire Sarah because she told a little white lie, when all these years he's let Marie think he was paying for her education! It was really Aunt Julie, you know."

"I didn't know," Dusty admitted. "And also I don't believe Sarah told even a little white lie. She's as honest as the day is long. If you ask me, it was Paul who put that tulle in the wrong place."

"If you ask *me*," Vicki cried indignantly, "Paul has done a lot of other wrong things." And then she told him her suspicions.

When she had finished, Dusty said, "Take it easy, Pint Size. Mme de Fres is rather fuzzy-brained, and Aunt Julie may have said a lot of things in anger that she didn't really mean. I imagine she's pretty mad at the way Paul has been treating Marie lately."

Vicki felt completely deflated for a minute. Aunt Julie *was* angry, so angry that she had repeated a family scandal in the presence of gossipy old Madame. And yet deep down inside her Vicki was sure that there was a hiding place in the parlour wall at Magnolia Manor, and in that place was Etienne Breaux's last will and testament. But there was nothing she could do until she talked to Bill.

They were driving along country roads now, passing a beautifully placed cemetery where the walks were shaded by weeping willows and in which there were no headstones but where flowers and rose bushes grew in profusion. Between wooded sections, overgrown driveways led to vast plantations, long neglected. It was a warm, sunny afternoon and the air was fragrant with the breath of spring.

Vicki leaned back and relaxed. Now that she was far away from the gloomy atmosphere of the pension, the Breaux family seemed like people she had dreamed about or had seen in the movies.

They drove along in silence for a while. Then Dusty turned into a rutted road, lined with huge live oaks dripping with Spanish moss.

"Well, here we are," he said. "Bill had better do something about this road if he expects to lure anybody out to his night club."

The car bounced and jounced until Vicki cried, "Let me out! I'll be headless pretty soon if this keeps up."

Dusty grinned at her sidewise. "You'd look cute even without a head, but not nearly so cute as you look with the one you've got. Did anybody ever tell you you were pretty, Vic?"

The car was rattling so that Vicki let her bobbing head answer the question. Dusty's grin widened. "I can't tell whether you're answering in the negative or the affirmative, but I can make a good guess. Cap'n tells me I've got a lot of competition, among whom are a brand-new senior pilot and a newspaper reporter."

Vicki thought about Dean Fletcher and Pete Carmody, and wondered how Jean Cox's romance with Pete was progressing. How all three of them would have liked to be embarked with her on this mystery!

Or was it a mystery? Had she been letting her imagination run away with her solely because she disliked and distrusted Paul Breaux?

The driveway twisted along under the trees; then suddenly it straightened, and there, not many yards away, was the big white-pillared mansion. It was flanked on either side by wide verandas on the ground and second floors. It was a dignified house, but it made Vicki feel as though it were dreaming happily of its gay past and waiting for an even gayer future. Workmen's cars and trucks were parked all along the driveway which encircled the mansion, and from the open windows Vicki could hear a hum of activity.

"Bill certainly did a beautiful job landscaping the grounds," she said, admiring the sloping rock garden, riotously coloured with tiny tropical flowers. The land around the house had been thoughtfully planted with just the right amount of trees and shrubs so that the green lawn was a patchwork of bright sun and cool shadows. "It's lovely," she said. "I wonder where Bill is. I don't see the Bug."

"It's probably parked in back," Dusty said as he opened the door for her. "Here comes a guy who looks like the foreman. Jacobson, I think Bill said his name was."

Striding down the wide front steps was a man in spotlessly clean dungarees with a visored cap planted way back on his close-cropped greying hair. He was short, sturdy looking, and moved with authority in every step. "Good afternoon," he greeted them with neither welcome nor rebuff in his voice. "Anything I can do for you?"

Here was a busy man who would brook no nonsense, Vicki decided. He did not mix business with pleasure and saw to it that the men under him did their daily stint. Not because he was a slave driver, but because he commanded respect.

"You're Jacobson, aren't you?" Dusty asked easily. "We're looking for Bill Graham."

"He's not around just now," the foreman said shortly.

"Oh." Vicki gasped with disappointment. Bill *would* be away from his pet project just when she had a free day. "We did so hope we could look around inside."

Jacobson hesitated and pushed his cap forward slightly so he could scratch the back of his head with short, stubby fingers. "We-ell, I haven't time to show you around myself and I can't let you wander about without the boss's okay."

"Oh dear," Vicki moaned. "We probably won't have another day off for weeks! Couldn't we just take a peek at the parlour?"

The foreman glanced at her sharply. "The parlour? Why, that room hasn't been touched yet! Should think you'd want to see the redecorating job we've done in the finished part of the house."

"Oh, we do," Vicki said hastily, "but we don't want to take up too much of your time. I'd like to see the parlour because Mr. Paul Breaux, the former owner, you know, has told me so much about how it looked when he was a boy."

Jacobson shrugged. "Okay, okay. But what's so interesting about that bare, mildewed wall is beyond me. Now, Mr. Breaux, he's got some reason for hanging around and taking pictures, so he'll remember how the room looked before we tear down the wall, but I should think you two young people might like to see the old dining-room which we just finished papering today."

They followed him into the house and Vicki nudged Dusty. "See?" she whispered. "Paul *has* been snooping around, pretending he's taking pictures. He's about as sentimental as a hungry tiger!"

Dusty made a face at her. "Have it your own way, Miss Detective."

"Detective?" The foreman stopped dead in his tracks. "Did you say she was a detective?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Just a joke, Jacobson," Dusty said soothingly. "She's really a flight stewardess and I'm a pilot."

Jacobson smiled grimly but Vicki suspected that, against his will, he was beginning to unbend a little. "A flight stewardess, eh? That's all my daughter, Molly, talks about. She's not quite thirteen, but she's bound and determined to be a stewardess someday."

Vicki and Dusty followed the foreman along the paint-splattered strip of canvas that covered the floor of the long hall from end to end. The folding doors on the east side had been drawn back and Vicki caught a glimpse of a lovely room which she guessed must be the second, or informal, parlour. Jacobson yanked away one of the doors across the hall and grudgingly led them into a long, high-ceilinged room.

"This is it," he said with a trace of sarcasm in his voice. "Pretty, isn't it?"

Vicki had expected to see an enlargement of the pension parlour with its heirlooms, portraits, and bric-a-brac. But the walls were bare and the furniture was a shapeless mound under a grey canvas tent in the centre of the floor.

"Very pretty," Dusty was chuckling. "When does the wall come down, Jacobson?"

"That's for the boss to say," the foreman replied. "He must have got word from Mr. Carlisle to hold off for a while. I wouldn't like to be in Mr. Graham's shoes. The new owner can't seem to make up his mind what he wants around here. If I had to take orders from him, I'd quit. Now, Mr. Graham, he's just the opposite. Knows what he wants and gets it without a lot of talk."

"Do you expect him back soon?" Vicki asked. It was tantalising to be so near that wall and yet so far.

"He didn't say when he'd be back." Jacobson hammered the palm of one hand with the fist of the other. "Seen enough in here?"

"I guess so," Vicki said reluctantly. "What's the room on the other side like?"

"Come see for yourself." He led them out and slammed the door back in place impatiently. "It's the only other room that hasn't been touched, but since you're only interested in the ugly ones, you might as well give it a look."

Vicki meekly followed him down the hall and noticed that the dividing wall on both sides was unusually thick. She remembered that the thickness on the east side would be accounted for by the massive fireplace and built-in china closets in the dining-room Bill had said Mr. Carlisle admired so much. How would it be accounted for in the library?

Built-in bookcases, she saw at once, was the answer. They occupied the entire north wall of the library, running the width of the room from east to west, and the height, from the floor halfway to the ceiling.

"These must be the books Bill said Mr. Carlisle would probably get a good price for," she said to Dusty.

"That's right," Jacobson put in. "I was told to handle 'em with kid gloves."

Then Vicki saw that two men were emptying the shelves and carefully packing the handsomely bound books in coffinlike containers with sliding tops. "Oh," she said, "have they already been sold?"

"Can't say." The foreman sat down at the desk, the only piece of furniture that wasn't covered with canvas, and began riffling through some papers. "Books have got to come out before the wall can come down," he said tersely. The phone rang and he picked it up. "Jacobson speaking . . . Yeah, yeah—no . . ."

While this was going on, Vicki moved nearer to the partly emptied shelves. They were made of beautifully grained mahogany boards and the uprights were delicately carved in a floral design.

"What a shame," she thought. "They've been treated like orange crates, all mildewed and thick with dust."

She heard Jacobson hang up and Dusty say:

"Do you mind if I use the phone? I've got to report in to our boss for orders."

While Dusty was calling Captain Jordan at the airport, Vicki moved across the room to the west sections of the bookcase where the shelves were now empty. The boards were broad, but were they broad enough to account for the thickness of the dividing wall between the parlour and the library? Vicki thought not, but she knew that old houses were almost always built with extremely thick walls. Then she noticed that the backboard of one section was composed of three separate planks with the grain of the wood running horizontally. But the backboard of the adjoining section was a solid mahogany plank, the grain running vertically from the floor to the top.

"That's funny," Vicki thought. "Why aren't both backboards alike? Unless—unless that solid vertical plank is a door."

She glanced over her shoulder to see if Jacobson had his sharp eyes on her, but he was busily signing his name at the bottom of a sheaf of thin papers. Dusty was saying to Captain Jordan on the phone:

"Okay, chief. Swell. Swell. Couldn't be better."

The workmen, who were emptying the shelves, were now working on the east section on the other side of the room. Vicki quickly ran her fingers up and down the dusty uprights. One of the carved flowers in the design was almost completely obliterated by mould—or seemed to be.

Was it a flower or a button, perhaps the knob of a hidden spring? Vicki pressed it lightly and the section moved a fraction of an inch inward as though the backboard were attached by hinges to one of the uprights.

"I've found it," she thought, inwardly exulting. "And if Paul weren't so lazy he could have found it as quickly as I did. If he had taken the time and trouble to remove the books, he couldn't have missed noticing that the backboard of this was made with a solid, *doorlike* plank."

"A penny for your thoughts." It was Dusty, grinning down at her.

"They're worth a small fortune." Vicki grinned back. "What are our orders?"

"Meteorologist says weather will be clear over the Gulf tomorrow, and we get Saturday off."

"Wonderful," Vicki cried. "We'll get back Friday just in time for the ball, and we can sleep late the next morning."

Jacobson stood up and slapped his papers in a drawer. "We knock off in about ten minutes," he said. "You two plan to hang around here all night?"

Vicki laughed. "No, we'll be——" She stopped as her eye fell on something that had been snagged by a split rung in the foreman's chair. It was a bit of silvery tulle!

Jacobson and Dusty were both staring at her, and Vicki quickly said, "We'll be leaving any minute now. I was just wondering if I could use the phone to call Mr. Graham."

"Sorry," the foreman snapped, "no long-distance calls allowed."

"Long distance?" Vicki repeated. "Do you consider New Orleans long distance?"

"No, but New York is," Jacobson said.

Vicki was completely baffled. "Are you trying to tell me that Mr. Graham is in New York?" she finally got out.

"I'm not trying to tell you anything," the foreman said. "Mr. Graham *is* in New York. If he had come back he would have let me know."

"Well, that *is* news," Dusty said. "When did he leave, Jacobson?"

"On the seven-thirty plane Saturday morning."

"He can't be in New York," Vicki said, and pointed to the west veranda. "I saw his car parked down there near the swamp when we flew over just before eight on Saturday morning."

"Well, I ought to know," Jacobson snapped. He reached into a cubbyhole of the desk and handed Vicki an envelope. "Go ahead, read it."

The name of Bill's hotel was printed in the upper left-hand corner of the envelope, and it had been postmarked in New Orleans at 8 A.M., Saturday morning. Vicki pulled out the folded hotel stationery and read the typed message:

"Dear Jacobson: Am leaving this morning on the seven-thirty plane to New York for a final conference with Mr. Carlisle re: the demolition job. Do nothing till I return."

It was signed "Bill Graham."

CHAPTER XII

A Shred of Silvery Tulle

VICKI COULD HARDLY BELIEVE HER EYES AS SHE STARED at the typewritten words and Bill's signature. It didn't make sense. Why had Bill made an appointment with Marie to meet him on Sunday at her aunt's, and then left the city without any explanation? And why had he left the Bug parked below the swamp in a clearing?

"I just can't believe it," Vicki said as she handed the letter back to the foreman. "I saw Mr. Graham's little blue Bantam when we flew over the plantation on Saturday and again on Monday morning. Why, you must have seen it yourself. It didn't look from the air as though it was parked very far from the house."

Jacobson snorted. "Guess you don't know much about cypress swamps. If a car was parked half a mile from the house we couldn't see it from here. And let me tell you, miss, you may have seen a blue Bantam down there, but it wasn't Mr. Graham's. He's got better sense than to try to drive a car down that swamp road. What you saw was probably one of those ramshackle wrecks the Cajuns rattle around in."

"That's right, Vic," Dusty put in. "Bill himself said several times on Friday evening that nothing could lure him into that labyrinth. You must have seen a Cajun jalopy."

"But it wasn't a jalopy," Vicki argued. "It was newly painted and glistened in the sunlight. That's how I happened to notice it."

Jacobson shrugged. "A Cajun can paint as well as the next fellow when he gets around to it. Furthermore Mr. Graham doesn't own the only blue Bantam in this neck of the woods." He closed and locked his roll-top desk.

"Oh, please don't make us go just yet, Mr. Jacobson," Vicki begged. "I'm all mixed up and rather worried about Mr. Graham. Could you give me Mr. Carlisle's phone number so I can——?"

"Don't know his phone number *or* his address," the foreman interrupted. "I have as little to do with that shilly-shallying Northerner as I can. First he wants two rooms, then he wants one, and now I guess he's changed his mind again. Next thing you know we'll be knocking down all the walls, and that's the day I quit."

"It's time you quit for the day right now, Jake," a voice drawled from the doorway. "Get the phone fixed yet?" A tall, lean old man with a pleasant, leathery face came slouching into the room.

"Yeah," Jacobson told him. "And when I find out who was the clumsy fool who broke the wire, Boots, I'll—I'll——"

Boots laughed and folded himself into the chair beside the desk. "You'll very politely teach him how to walk without tripping, huh?"

And for the first time since Vicki had seen him, the burly little foreman grinned. Apparently he liked old Boots for he said jokingly, "Sure it wasn't you, brother? Weren't you called 'Foots' until you grew too big for nicknames?"

The old night watchman glanced down rather proudly at his large feet. He hitched his chair around so that he could display them to everyone in the room.

And that gave Vicki her chance. She reached down swiftly and snatched the shred of silvery tulle away from the split rung.

"I guess I got the biggest feet in Louisiana," Boots was drawling.

"You sure have," Jacobson chuckled. To Vicki's amazement, he turned to her and said pleasantly, "This is the night watchman, miss. He'll answer your questions about Mr. Graham from now on." He tipped his cap and left with his two workmen.

Vicki turned to the watchman, smiling. "I hear you never sleep, Mr. Boots," she said. "Is that true?"

Boots pulled an ancient pipe from his pocket and slowly filled it with strong-smelling tobacco. "Not exactly," he said thoughtfully. "When I was about your age I used to sleep a lot. Then one day I went to a box social. My sweetheart had spent all morning packing a nice lunch and fixing it up with pretty ribbon and such. But when it came time for me to bid for it, I didn't. 'Cause I was sound asleep." He held a match to his pipe and glanced over the flame at Vicki. "Since then I've always slept with one eye open, and I guess you can tell the young gentleman why, miss."

"I guess I can." Vicki giggled. "But, right now, I wish *you'd* tell me Mr. Carlisle's phone number and address."

Boots tilted back in his chair, bracing his feet against the roll-top desk. "I'd do almost anything for a pretty young lady like you, miss, except lie to her. All I know about the new owner is that he's going to be good and riled when he gets the bill for my taxis back and forth between here and town. And it's his own fault for calling Mr. Bill up North at a time like this." He waved his pipe towards the bookcases. "Jacobson doesn't know from one day to the next what to do. Now Mr. Breaux, when he came out here Monday morning, he was all for nobody doing anything until Mr. Bill came back. But Jacobson didn't see eye to eye with him. Says he, showing the old gentleman the letter, 'Mr. Graham says 'do nothing until I return, but by that he means do nothing about the wall until I return.'

"Says Mr. Breaux, 'Not at all, not at all. When Mr. Graham says do nothing he means exactly that. Dismiss your men, Jacobson. You're wasting Mr. Carlisle's money.'

"'What still has to be done,' says Jacobson, 'still has to be done, whether the wall comes down or not. I take my orders from Mr. Graham, sir, and I'll thank you not to inferfere.'"

Boots sucked on his pipe. "Well, it went on like that until the taxi I'd ordered on Friday came for me."

"Oh," Vicki broke in. "Then you knew on Friday that Bill was going to New York. I was sure he'd driven out here in the Bug that night and got stuck in the mud down in the swamp."

The old watchman's big feet slid off the desk with a bang. "Mr. Bill's car stuck in the swamp? What're you talking about, miss? Mr. Bill wasn't out here on Friday night."

Vicki bit her lip. What she had seen from the air must have been a Cajun car, after all.

"Well, then," Vicki asked, "how did you know he wasn't going to be here on Monday morning to drive you back to town?"

"I didn't know," Boots said, a little on the defensive, Vicki thought. "He told me when he drove me out here Friday afternoon to order a cab to take me back Monday morning. Said he didn't want to leave until the demolition job on the parlour wall was under way."

Vicki thought for a minute, remembering the telephone. "Bill wrote to the foreman that he was going to New York, Boots. It's strange that he didn't phone and let you know where he could be reached in case of an emergency."

Boots, more on the defensive than ever, said evenly, "Because, miss, the phone was out of order, that's why."

Vicki's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "It was out of order on Friday night and wasn't fixed until today? That seems like awfully poor service."

Boots's pipe had gone out and he held another match to it before replying. Then he said, almost humbly, "I'm an old man, miss, and I forgot to report that it was out of order until this morning. Jacobson didn't have occasion to use the phone on Monday or Tuesday. We don't get many incoming calls."

He looked like a big overgrown puppy that had just been unjustly scolded and Vicki felt ashamed of herself for making him unhappy. So she quickly changed the subject. Anyway, she was more interested in Paul Breaux's visits to the mansion than she was in the telephone repair service.

"You're awfully kind, Boots," she said soothingly, "to answer all my silly questions. But, tell me, wasn't it rather unusual for Mr. Breaux to turn up here so early on Monday morning?"

"Oh, no," Boots assured her. "Lately he's been coming around at the crack of dawn. Since he heard about the wall coming down, I mean. Never knew the old gentleman cared so much for the place."

Vicki gave Dusty a glance which said, "I told you so," and he nodded, in full agreement with her suspicions now.

"What do you mean by the crack of dawn?" he asked Boots. "I always thought Mr. Breaux was a late sleeper."

"How wrong you are," Boots chuckled, once more completely at ease. "Now take Saturday. It was still hardly light enough to see your hand in front of your face, and I found him in the library, just about where you're standing, miss, snooping through the books. I could see him plainly, miss, because the taxi, making a circuit of the house, shone its headlights right in through these French doors. Says I, 'Well, this is an unexpected pleasure, Mr. Breaux. Looking for something?'

"Says he, 'Ah, my good friend, Boots. Perhaps you can help me. Last evening at dinner Mr. Graham informed me that this wall was to be taken down, the work starting early this morning. I came out to get a few of the old family albums. Pictures of my family, you know. Treasures to me, but worthless to Mr. Carlisle. But I can't find the light switch and the battery in my torch is getting weak."

"Says I, suspicious, because he must know where the switch is better than I do, him having lived out here as a boy summers and all, says I, 'Right by the telephone box, sir, but it won't do you any good. Mr. Carlisle had the current turned off when he left here after the Mardi Gras."

"Something tells me, Boots," Vicki said with a smile, "that you were suspicious before Mr. Breaux asked about the light switch. After all, he could have forgotten where it was. The house was boarded up about fifteen years ago, and anyway, why should he think the light switch was still in the same place?"

"Well, now," Boots drawled, "I figure it this way. If he can remember exactly where those albums are, he hasn't forgotten where the switch is. And the switch is in the same place where it always was, Mr. Carlisle not having changed anything except to have the bathrooms tiled and such." He got up suddenly and strolled across the room. "If you want to know why I was really suspicious in the first place, miss, I'll tell you, because I like you. You're pretty and you've got a head on your shoulders. But let's go some place where we can all sit down."

Vicki and Dusty willingly followed him out to the veranda and down the steps. He ambled ahead of them along the driveway. "It was right about here that Mr. Breaux parked his car on Saturday morning, and I ask you, why did he leave it at the back of the house instead of the front as a gentleman should?"

Vicki poked Dusty with her elbow and formed with her lips, "Now we're getting somewhere."

Dusty nodded his head up and down.

Boots led them along a shady walk to the east side of the house, and there, almost completely hidden by a clump of magnolia trees, was a rude shack.

"This is my weekend home," he told them as he produced a key and snapped open the padlock on the door. "We keep our tools in here and such, but I've fixed it up real comfortable, with a cot and a couple of chairs and a kerosene stove. If I'm going to keep both my eyes open I'd best brew us a pot of coffee."

The shed was spotlessly clean and rudely but comfortably furnished. Vicki sank tiredly down on the cot and Dusty drew up a chair beside her.

"You two wait a minute," Boots said, taking a chipped enamel pot from a shelf. "I'll just go to the house for water and be right back."

"He's a darling, isn't he, Dusty?" Vicki asked when the old man's footsteps had died away. "But some of the things he says don't quite coincide with what he said before."

"He's certainly as eccentric as Bill said he was," Dusty agreed. "Can you imagine him having a sweetheart at a box social?"

"Oh, I can," Vicki cried. "And falling asleep during the auction too. I'll bet the girls were crazy about him when he was young. He's so friendly and has such a grand sense of humour."

"That's the trouble," Dusty said. "When he gets around to telling us why he was suspicious of Paul Breaux, we'll never know how much colour was added to give spice to the tale."

"I suppose not," Vicki admitted. "But look at this." She showed him the fragment of silvery tulle she had tucked into her pocket. "I'm positive, Dusty, that this came from the same bolt my costume is going to be made out of. I found it snagged on the chair-rung in the library."

Dusty whistled. "Now that's something. How did it walk from the Vieux Carré way out here?"

"It didn't walk," Vicki giggled. "It was toted, as Sarah would say. By whom, I don't know yet, but whoever that 'whom' was, it wasn't the clerk in the store who Aunt Julie thinks cheated her out of several yards."

Dusty howled with laughter. "You and your 'who's' and 'whom's!' I feel as though I was back in grade school."

"And *I* feel as though I were in kindergarten," Vicki said. "So many things don't make sense. You remember Boots said——"

"Sh-h," Dusty cautioned her. "Here he comes."

The old night watchman shuffled into the shack and soon the stove was lighted under the pot of water. As he worked, he said, "Some people likes it perked, some people likes it dripped, but me, I likes it biled." He settled down in an unpainted rocker beside Dusty. "We were talking about Mr. Paul Breaux, as I recall, and you, miss——"

"Call me Vicki, please. And this is Dusty."

Boots's brown eyes twinkled. "All right then, Vicki and Dusty, have either of you ever heard about the Dixie Swamp ghost?"

"Yes, we have," Vicki said. "Bill told us that Mr. Carlisle was pretending to feel cheated because he didn't see it when he was down here last."

"That's right," Boots said. "But he doesn't have to feel cheated any more. I saw that headless thing on Friday night."

Vicki sighed with disappointment. The nice old night watchman had turned out to be as silly as Mme de Fres! "You didn't see anything of the kind, Boots," she said rather crossly. "What are you talking about?"

"Mist rising from the marsh," Dusty began, but Boots stopped him.

"Mist, my young friend, couldn't flit around the house, up the front stairs and down the back, and then fade away completely just as I had it nicely trapped in the library."

Vicki slowly unclenched her hand and showed him the bit of silvery tulle. "Did the contraption look anything like this, Boots?"

He peered at it nearsightedly. "That it did, Miss Vicki. Like star dust, it was, when it flitted along the French windows in the moonlight. Then this is why it seemed to have no head." He reached up on the shelf again and brought down a piece of carefully folded black tissue paper. "I found it on the west veranda Saturday morning shortly after Mr. Breaux drove away in his old Ford."

CHAPTER XIII

The Ghost of Dixie Swamp

VICKI AND DUSTY STARED AT THE PIECE OF BLACK TISSUE paper until old Boots put it back on the shelf. So Sarah had not lied! She *had* wrapped the bolt of silvered tulle in black tissue and placed it on top of the other materials in the chest. Later, someone had removed the wrapping *and* several yards of the tulle, then packed it away on the bottom. That someone could only be Paul Breaux.

The night watchman was pouring coffee into big white china cups and Vicki asked:

"What time did you see the apparition, Boots? Do you remember?"

He punched holes in a small can of evaporated milk before replying. "Let me see. It must have been around eleven-thirty because I called——" the can opener slipped out of his hand and as he stooped to pick it up, he finished "—I called the taxi company right after the headless thing disappeared in the library. When I noticed the telephone it reminded me that I hadn't called yet to have them take me back to town on Monday morning, and I remember worrying for fear the office would be closed, it being so late."

He handed Vicki a cup of café au lait. "Oh," she said, "then the phone was still working at eleven-thirty? In that case, perhaps Jacobson was right. Maybe you did trip over the wire and break it."

Boots unfolded his long legs in a chair and grinned down at his huge feet. "As I said before, Miss Vicki, I got the biggest feet in the state, but I don't go around tripping over telephone wires. It was that ghostly contraption that must have put the phone out of order. The thing melted away in the library. Someone must have worked it with ropes and a pulley, and I figure it was Mr. Paul Breaux."

Vicki said nothing, but she knew that Paul couldn't have worked the ghostly contraption, for she herself had seen him leave the pension at midnight Friday. So he must have hired someone to flit through the mansion in black tissue paper and silvery tulle. And that someone must have been his mysterious visitor who had skulked away in the shadows after talking with Paul in the old locked parlour.

Vicki remembered that the conversation she had overheard that night had been carried on in a mixture of French and English. Who, besides Aunt Julie, switched freely back and forth between the two languages? The young Cajun boy, Saint! Was the ghost act the "good joke," Doucette St. Clair had giggled about en route to Merida early Saturday morning? Vicki remembered that Doucette had said proudly:

"Saint is so smart. He is only Cajun in the village who make big money having the good time."

Vicki began to suspect that Saint had not earned the money for the trip by selling his produce in the market. It was Paul who had paid for the trip—Paul shrewdly guessing that such an unusual occurrence would drive all other thoughts—and especially the memory of the headless spectre he had materialized—from the talkative young Cajun's mind.

It all seemed logical and explained why Saint had again visited the pension on Sunday evening. He had undoubtedly received half of his pay on Friday, and the balance due on Sunday. For it was that evening, shortly after the boy left the pension, that Vicki had heard Paul mumble to himself as he replaced some bills in the petty cashbox on his desk: "Fifty dollars is a lot of money."

And now Vicki could understand why Paul had been so furious when the young couples had not returned from the double date by ten o'clock on Friday evening. Paul must have previously made an appointment with Saint to meet him at the pension around ten-thirty and had counted on everyone being safely tucked away in bed before the Cajun boy arrived.

Vicki could understand a lot of heretofore inexplicable things about Paul, but there were still several questions she could not answer. Why had he gone to such expense to revive the Dixie Swamp ghost? And where had he been early Saturday morning to get mud on his shoes? He had eventually turned up at the mansion, where he was discovered by Boots, but the driveway was as dry as dust and so were the lawns and walks near the house.

Whatever the answers to these questions might be, Vicki was sure they would somehow tie in with the secret room. For a moment panic seized her. On Paul's next visit he could not help noticing the doorlike backboard in the west section now that the books had been removed from the shelves. Vicki was tempted to take Boots into her confidence and search for the old family strongbox then and there. But she knew she had no right to do that without Bill's or the new owner's permission. And she comforted herself with the reflection that, although Paul might discover the secret door as she had, he would have a hard time entering the room in the old wall with either the day crew or the night watchman always on the premises.

The thing to do, she decided, was to get in touch with Bill right away. On the way back to town, Vicki repeated the different steps in her reasoning to Dusty. "Even you," she said, "must admit that all the clues point to Paul. And I'm so afraid he'll find that will and destroy it before Bill gets back, I almost feel like taking the whole business to the police."

"Take it easy, Pint Size," Dusty cautioned her, "if you don't want to get involved in a nice little libel suit. You have absolutely no proof of anything."

"What about this piece of tulle?" Vicki demanded. "That's concrete evidence!"

Dusty shrugged. "Paul has a perfect right to provide the new owner of Magnolia Manor with a headless spectre if he wants to. Maybe he or whoever he hired to rig up the contraption was trespassing, but I doubt if Mr. Carlisle would prefer charges. He laid himself wide open for a practical joke by complaining that he had been cheated out of his ghost."

Vicki sighed. "I guess you're right. Even if I did find that Cajun boy and make him confess, it wouldn't do any good. Another thing I can't understand is why a taxi drove around the mansion at dawn on Saturday morning. Remember, Boots said its headlights shone through the French doors of the library?"

"I remember." Dusty nodded. "And I took it for granted that Paul had driven out in it."

"I did too," Vicki admitted, "until Boots pointed out the spot on the back driveway where Paul's old Ford was parked. Who drove out there in a taxi just before Boots discovered Paul lurking in the library?"

"Well," Dusty said, "it could have been somebody taxi-ing in to town from one of the estates around here. The driver might have turned into the Magnolia Manor driveway by mistake. Then he'd have to make a complete circuit of the house because the road's too narrow to turn around in, and in such terrible shape nobody would like to try backing out of it." He chuckled. "There's generally a simple answer for everything, Vic, if you don't let your imagination run away with you. Paul could even be more genuinely sentimental than we think. He might have worried all night about those family albums and gone out there at the crack of dawn before they were packed away with the other books."

"Except," Vicki pointed out, "that he must know the day crew doesn't work weekends."

"Yes, but Boots does," Dusty argued. "Packing away books doesn't require very skilled labour. I imagine it's just the kind of chore Bill would assign to Boots." He laughed. "The old codger might refuse to sweep a porch after sundown, but he could hardly refuse to fill in his spare time over the weekend by emptying the shelves so that work on the wall could start first thing Monday morning."

Something clicked in Vicki's mind then and started a new train of thought. She recalled Bill's exact words when he was describing his eccentric night watchman over coffee and doughnuts in the French Market last Friday night:

"It would take more than a bit of fog to scare that old codger——"

But how about the headless something that seemed to be made of star dust and melted away just as Boots had it trapped in the library? Vicki closed her eyes, trying to visualize that scene. Boots might not be easily frightened, but he *was* superstitious. Suppose, momentarily panicked when "the thing" unaccountably disappeared, he had telephoned Bill and then rushed out of the house, hitch-hiking his way back to town? The operator at Bill's hotel had said that the person who had called him around eleven-thirty had sounded hysterical, almost as though his teeth were chattering!

In her imagination Vicki could see the old night watchman making that hysterical call, and later, as he cooled off, growing ashamed of himself for being stampeded. He would, she felt sure, hire a cab and drive right back to the mansion. And now it was clear why Paul had hired someone to play ghost. He had hoped to frighten away the old night watchman so he could search for the secret door. And he had succeeded!

But although he had left the pension at midnight, and Boots had not returned to the mansion until dawn, Paul, during all that time, had not found the secret door. If he had, he wouldn't have spent most of Monday and Tuesday, snooping around, pretending to take pictures. Desperate as he was Friday night, he must have planned to take the trouble to remove the books in the library so he could search on that side of the wall. But he probably wasted valuable time on the parlour side and had hardly begun in the library when Boots returned in a taxi.

"It was Boots," Vicki told Dusty, "who drove up to the mansion in a cab early Saturday morning."

"Boots?" Dusty drove into a filling station and parked his roadster by one of the gasoline tanks. "Fill her up," he told the attendant, and turned back to Vicki. "Why Boots?"

Vicki explained. "Up until now," she finished, "I jumped to the conclusion that the hysterical-sounding man who called Bill on Friday must have been Mr. Carlisle who had changed his mind again and wanted to stop Bill before the wall was torn down."

"I still think it was," Dusty said. "And to prove it I'll call from a booth inside the station and make sure that call came from New York."

He was gone only a minute and came back to the car with a rueful expression on his tanned face. "Whew! Your gossipy little operator almost bit my ear off. Guess the manager must have given her the dickens for giving out information about the guests. She told me flatly she didn't have time to check back through her records, and even if she did have time, she wouldn't."

Vicki giggled. "Well, that's that." And then as Dusty started the car again, she said doggedly, "Just the same, the first thing I'm going to do when I get back to the pension is to call Mr. Carlisle in New York. Marie must know Bill's boss's number, don't you think?"

"I guess so." Dusty parked his car near a famous old restaurant, Antoine's, half a block from St. Louis and Royal Streets in the Vieux Carré. "It's early, but wouldn't you like to sink your teeth in a thick juicy steak? I'll bet you get sick of Creole cooking."

"Wonderful!" Vicki exclaimed. "Steak's my favourite food. I can skip dinner at the pension and while Paul is consuming plate after plate of gumbo, I can be telephoning New York."

CHAPTER XIV

Vicki Lists Her Clues

BUT AFTER A DELICIOUS STEAK DINNER, VICKI returned to the pension and found to her disappointment that Marie did not know Mr. Carlisle's telephone number or address. "I think he lives in the suburbs," she told Vicki, "but I do know that he generally plays squash at his club in New York for an hour before lunch. Bill called him there once."

Vicki sank down on Marie's huge bed, trying not to let her disappointment show. Marie herself was terribly disappointed that Vicki had not been able to bring back a message from her fiancé, but she was not worried about him, for Vicki had told her about the letter the foreman had received on Monday morning.

Suddenly Vicki had a solution to her problem. Since she would be in the air before lunch on Thursday, and in Guatemala City at that time on Friday, she couldn't call Mr. Carlisle's club. But one of her friends in New York could.

She told Marie about the apartment she shared with five other stewardesses and said, "The minute your uncle settles down to dinner I'll call Mrs. Duff. Even if the girls are all out, she'll know what their assignments are. One of them is sure to be on rest leave or having a couple of free days."

Uncle Paul seemed rather hurt when he learned Vicki had already dined, but he could not refuse her request for the key to the office so she could use the telephone. Vicki thanked him and slipped out of the dining-room, promising to return in time for the dessert Sarah had made especially for her.

In the little office she switched on the light and glanced swiftly down the card of typed names and numbers that was tacked to the wall over the telephone table. This took several minutes because some of the letters on the old pension machine were so badly out of alignment and the ribbon so worn that Vicki could hardly read all of the names. Mr. Carlisle's name was not on the list.

It took several more minutes to get through to New York but at last she heard Mrs. Duff's cheerful voice:

"Land sakes, Vicki Barr, what are ye up to now, calling all the way from New Orleans, Louisiana! I declare, this phone has been ringing all evening—it's enough to drive a body wild. And my girls scattered up and down the Coast, except for Charmion Wilson. She's here. Would ye like to speak to her?"

"Yes, I would, Mrs. Duff," Vicki said, and could almost hear the roly-poly housekeeper bustling away from the phone.

A second later Charmion's sweet voice came over the wire. "Vicki! How nice of you to call. How do you like New Orleans *and* your new co-pilot?"

"The answer to both questions is very much," Vicki told her. "But I haven't the time nor the money to tell you about them now. Charmion, are you by any chance off duty?"

"Yes, I am," the young widow said. "Until the week-end. Unless I'm called out on an emergency of course."

"Wonderful," Vicki cried. And then she explained that she wanted Charmion to keep calling Mr. Carlisle at his club before lunch on Thursday, and Friday, if necessary, until she got him. "When you do get hold of him," she said, "please ask him how I can get in touch with Bill Graham by phone or telegram when I return from Guatemala City on Friday. I'll check with you as soon as possible after we land, Charmion."

"All very baffling," Charmion said with a light laugh "What mystery are you tracking down now, Vic?"

"I'm trying to find a missing will," Vicki told her. "I'm sorry I can't tell you more now, but it's terribly important that I get in touch with Bill Graham. I'm counting on you, Charmion. Do the best you can, and don't stir from the apartment until you hear from me around eight-thirty Friday evening."

"I won't," Charmion promised.

As Vicki put the receiver back on the hook, the door to the office opened slowly and Paul Breaux came into the room. He stood just inside the doorsill, staring at her.

"More long-distance calls?"

"That's right," Vicki said, trying to sound unconcerned. Had he been listening out in the corridor to every word? As she waited for the operator to report the toll charges, she said as casually as possible, "My second family is in New York. I share an apartment there with five girls who all graduated from Stewardess School with me."

"Indeed?" Paul inquired affably. "You must miss them. I imagine you have lots of beaus and gay parties. And that reminds me, will you be here for our little Marie's ball on Friday?"

Vicki nodded. "But Dusty and I will be a little late. We take off for Guatemala tomorrow morning, and we won't get back to New Orleans until eight o'clock Friday evening. I understand the party begins at nine?" She laid some money on the desk and started out of the room.

Paul followed her, locking the door behind him. "You must hurry back to the table, chérie. Sarah was about to serve the sherbet when I came to get you."

But Sarah had not yet brought in the dessert when Vicki slipped into her chair. Paul, apparently, had deliberately left the dining-room on some pretext in order to listen to her telephone conversation!

"He suspects me," Vicki thought, "or did. Marie must have told him that I visited Magnolia Manor today. But he couldn't have heard me telling Charmion I'm searching for a missing will or he wouldn't look as complacent as he does."

For the fat little man was smiling benignly at Marie, as though he hadn't a care in the world. "While Madame and I are having coffee in the patio, chérie, you and Miss Vicki must parade in your costumes. Madame," he explained to Vicki, "will not go to the ball. The night air, you know, it makes her ill. So it is only fair that she should have a preview, no?"

"Oh, is my dress finished already?" Vicki asked in surprise.

"Yes, Vicki." Marie smiled across the table at her. "Aunt Julie and Sarah and I worked on it all afternoon. It is so lovely I can hardly wait to see you in it."

Aunt Julie, Vicki decided, had worked on something else too. With her tact and cleverness she had somehow cleared the discordant atmosphere which had pervaded the pension when Vicki had left with Dusty right after lunch. How had she soothed Paul's ruffled feathers, stopped Marie's weeping and restored Sarah's good nature? The answer to those questions Vicki would never know, for she could not pry into family matters, but it made her realize that Marie had a staunch ally in her Aunt Julie.

Was Aunt Julie powerful enough to see to it that the engagement was announced as scheduled on Friday if Bill returned in time?

The next morning, before their take-off to Guatemala, Vicki said to Dusty, "You've got the binoculars now. How about taking a quick look at that car as we fly over Dixie Swamp? Somehow, I'm still sure it's the Bug."

When the young co-pilot came back later to stretch his legs he beckoned Vicki into her tiny galley. "You're right, Pint Size," he whispered. "It does look like the Bug. And even if it isn't, I'm curious. Not even a Cajun would leave a newly painted car in that damp neck of the woods for almost a week."

"Oh, Dusty," Vicki cried, "I don't care what that letter said. I'm really worried about Bill. I can't believe he'd go to New York and stay all this time without sending some message to Marie. I know he couldn't send a letter to the pension without Paul intercepting it, but he could have written care of you or Aunt Julie."

"That's true," Dusty agreed. "When we get back to town I'll call Bill's garage and see if the Bug's there."

Vicki made up her mind quickly. "And when we land at Merida *I'm* going to call Marion Delbeau at the Roosevelt and see if Bill really was on her New York flight Saturday morning."

At the stopover in Mexico, Vicki raced to a phone booth. She guessed that Marion would be sleeping late on her day off, and she was right.

"Graham?" Marion repeated in a rather fuzzy voice. "William G. Graham? No, Vic, I'm sure I've never had a passenger by that name. I would have remembered it because you know how fond I am of graham crackers."

As Vicki hurried back through the waiting room she passed the spot where the young Cajun couple had sat on Saturday, whispering and giggling together. She had felt then that they were talking about her, and now she was sure of it. Saint had seen her at the French Market the night before with Marie, Bill, and Dusty. At that time he had probably already agreed to play ghost for Paul and had promised to go to the pension around ten-thirty for his paraphernalia.

Later, in Guatemala City, over frosty glasses of lemonade, Vicki said:

"Dusty, if Paul hired Saint for one job that was successful, why not hire him for another?"

"What are you driving at?" Dusty demanded.

"I think Paul paid Saint to lure Bill down to the swamp and lose him there." She leaned forward across the table. "I'm sure now Bill never left New Orleans, Dusty. If he wasn't on Marion Delbeau's flight——"

"Wait a minute," Dusty interrupted. "Maybe he got a last-minute cancellation on an earlier plane. That happens, you know, and Bill certainly would have snapped it up. When he decides to do anything or go anywhere, he does it, bang, bang."

"That's true," Vicki agreed, not at all deflated. "But since I talked to Marion I've been doing a lot of thinking. And I think the mud on Paul's shoes had something to do with the Bug being in the swamp."

Dusty stared at her incredulously. "Oh, come now, Vic. You don't really think Paul kidnapped Bill?"

"I'm sure of it," Vicki said. "An hour before we landed I decided to make a list of all my clues. I didn't want to waste the airlines' stationery so I started to jot them down on the back of the receipt for my board and lodgings which Paul gave me my first day at the pension." She reached into her handbag and produced a crumpled sheet of paper. "Here it is," she said, smoothing out the wrinkles. "See how badly out of alignment the letters 'h,' 'n,' and 'b' are?"

Dusty nodded. "That typewriter at the pension is older than Marie."

"I imagine it is," Vicki agreed. "I first noticed how old it was when Marie typed me some Creole recipes. Then when Jacobson showed me that letter yesterday signed 'Bill Graham' I thought it looked familiar, but assumed it was because I'd seen the note Bill wrote Marie on the same hotel stationery. But that note was written in longhand and signed 'Bill.' It wasn't until I glanced at this receipt again that I realized something I should have realized yesterday. Whoever wrote that letter to Jacobson used the pension machine, and forged Bill's signature!"

"Paul!" Dusty gasped. "Gosh, Vic, you've been right all along." Soberly he pushed his dark, wavy hair back from his forehead. "But we can't do anything until you check with Mr. Carlisle to make absolutely sure Bill *didn't* arrive in New York. Bill's ancient hotel just might have a typewriter as ancient as the Breaux'."

"It might," Vicki said, "But I doubt if it has the same three letters out of alignment. No, Dusty, early Saturday morning, Paul went into the lobby of Bill's hotel. If it's as old as you say it is, it's probably badly lighted, so it was easy for him to steal some stationery. Then he went back to the pension and wrote that letter and traced Bill's signature from some letter about the mansion. I imagine he used carbon paper and wrote over it with ink, for it looked blurred, as though Bill were in such a hurry that he hadn't bothered to blot it. Then Paul calmly mailed the letter so that it was postmarked at eight that morning. Paul knew there was a seven-thirty plane to New York, for he listened outside my door when I was telling Sarah about Marion Delbeau over breakfast."

"Boy, oh, boy," Dusty said admiringly. "You're some little detective. All we have to do is catch that Cajun boy and make him confess. Then we can notify the police."

"That's the next step," Vicki agreed, "and when we find him, he'll confess readily enough, because I'm sure we'll find that Bill's with him."

"What makes you so sure of that?" Dusty demanded. "That Cajun boy didn't look like a kidnapper to me."

Vicki smiled. "I don't think he is, actually. But if Paul paid him *not* to help Bill find his way out of the swamp, it amounts to almost the same thing. Bill can't paddle a pirogue, remember?"

She added mysteriously, "When we fly over Dixie Swamp on the return flight tomorrow, look down at it through your binoculars. If you see what I saw on Sunday and Tuesday nights, I think you'll agree that Bill is in one of the bayou villages."

CHAPTER XV

The Masked Ball

THE BIG SILVER SHIP CIRCLED ABOVE NEW ORLEANS AND came down at eight on the nose. Vicki ushered her passengers off, checked over the cabin for any lost articles, then turned in her reports. She got through her work so quickly that she had to wait a few minutes for Dusty, but at last she saw him coming toward her in the slanting glare of beacon lights.

He tucked her hand conspiratorially through his arm and led her in to the waiting room whispering:

"I saw it, Vic, a blinker light, but it looked more to me as though someone down in Dixie Swamp was signalling an S O S to us with a pretty weak flashlight."

Vicki sucked in her breath. "That's what I was afraid of. I saw it on Sunday and Tuesday nights too, but without the binoculars. It looked like a giant firefly and I thought it was some sort of a Cajun signal. But now I'm sure it's Bill."

"We don't *know* it yet," Dusty said cautiously. "Pop into a phone booth and call your friend in New York. If Mr. Carlisle told her Bill didn't arrive on Saturday, then we can get into action."

Vicki started across the lobby. "You call Bill's garage," she said, "and check on the Bug."

They slipped into neighbouring booths and in another minute or so Vicki was talking to Mrs. Duff.

"Sure, and the poor lamb was called out on emergency duty right after she opened her eyes yesterday morning," she said when Vicki asked to speak to Charmion. "I don't expect her back home until the weekend."

Vicki could hardly disguise the disappointment in her voice as she said good-bye and hung up. It was maddening to know that Bill's letter was a forgery but not be able to prove it.

Dusty came out of his booth looking very serious. "I finally got hold of the boss," he told Vicki. "Nobody else seemed to know anything. He said Bill took his car out around midnight on Friday and never returned it."

"That settles it," Vicki said firmly. "I don't suppose we can rescue Bill tonight, but we can tomorrow if you borrow your friends' helicopter."

"That's right," Dusty agreed. "And Bill's okay if he's with the Cajuns. They're very warm and friendly people." He shook his head thoughtfully. "I still can't see that Cajun boy kidnapping anybody. I think Bill went into the swamp for some reason or other and got himself lost. Saint saw him wandering around in that labyrinth and reported to Paul. That's what he was doing last Sunday evening at the pension. Paul promptly paid Saint more money to keep Bill out of his hair until he finds the will."

"I agree with you up to a point," Vicki said. "Maybe you can't see Saint kidnapping anybody, but neither can I see Bill going down into that swamp at night *of his own free will.* Somebody forced or lured him, and if it wasn't Saint it must have been Paul. I think at first he planned for Bill to be lost only over the weekend, but when Boots came back in that taxi at dawn Paul had to change his plans."

"I see what you mean," Dusty said. "The weekends are the safest for Paul, with the day crew gone from four on Friday until eight on Monday morning. During that time he has only one man to deal with, Boots."

Vicki nodded. "And that's what worries me. Bill's not going to stay in that bayou village forever. Sooner or later he's going to try to get out by himself." She grinned. "I'll bet he's been taking lessons in how to paddle a pirogue all week. So Paul's time is running out. Don't you see, Dusty? He must know the secret of the library bookcase by now, and I'm as sure as anything that he plans to go out there *tonight* and get that will by hook or by crook."

"You're right, Vic," Dusty said thoughtfully. "During the masquerade, before the unmasking, he could sneak out and get back without anyone knowing he'd left Aunt Julie's house. Do you really think he's desperate enough to bop old Boots on the head?"

"I certainly do," Vicki said emphatically. "He wouldn't dare do it without an alibi which the party tonight conveniently provides for him. If Boots got bopped at any other time, a lot of people would start putting two and two together. I think Jacobson, for one, is too shrewd to be taken in for very long by Paul lurking in that bare old parlour with his little camera. And Boots, as we know, already suspects him. Boots feels now, as I do, that Paul yanked out that telephone wire on purpose. Boots doesn't know why he did, of course, but we do."

"*I* don't," Dusty admitted.

"Because," Vicki explained, "at that time it was important that Boots should be unable to call Bill at his hotel and find him missing. Paul hadn't yet figured out a way of accounting for Bill's absence. I don't think he concocted the scheme of a forged letter until later that morning when he was listening outside my door and heard me tell Sarah about the seven-thirty flight to New York. That gave him an idea and he hoped to kill two birds with one stone: account for Bill's absence and stop all work out at the mansion. He did succeed in stopping work on the wall, but it must have made him furious when Jacobson refused to dismiss his men on Monday."

They were hurrying across the airfield to the parking lot now and Dusty said, "We'd better make it snappy. The party begins at nine and it's almost that now. How long will it take you to get into your costume?"

Vicki climbed into the front seat and Dusty started the motor. "Five minutes for a shower," she said with a giggle, "and five minutes more to become a fairy princess. What are you going to be, Dusty?"

He laughed. "That's a surprise. The important thing is to find out what disguise Paul is going to wear. We mustn't let him out of our sight until the unmasking."

"I know what he's going to wear," Vicki said complacently, "though Paul doesn't know I know." She told him about the elaborate jester's costume Aunt Julie had showed her on Wednesday. "There may be plenty of other buffoons at the ball," she said, "but we can easily distinguish Paul."

"Good," Dusty said as he turned into a narrow street. Just ahead of them, an old Ford sedan was drawing away from the Breaux pension. "There they go, Paul and Marie. Guess Sarah will let you in."

Vicki jumped out of the roadster and hurried around to the big front door. Sarah had not yet locked it from the inside and opened it a second after Vicki knocked.

"Hurry, hurry, Miss Vicki," she said, bustling down the corridor. "I've already drawn your tub and laid your things out on the bed."

Twenty minutes later Vicki was pirouetting in the patio before Dusty's admiring eyes. The full skirt of her costume shimmered in the moonlight, and the paste jewels in her headdress and girdle twinkled and flashed.

"Gosh," Dusty said, "you sure do look as though you were made of star dust. I know how poor old Boots felt now. I wouldn't be at all surprised if you suddenly melted away into the splash of the fountain."

It was Vicki's turn now to admire Dusty. He was very handsome as a medieval knight in a glittering coat of mail and a shining helmet with bright-coloured plumes.

"I don't have to wear a mask," he said, closing the visor. "Have you got a domino?"

"I don't need one," Vicki said, and whirled a veil of the silvery tulle over her head and face. "No one knows me, anyway."

"They will," Dusty said ruefully as they strolled through the narrow streets of the old French Quarter to the Ewing home. "Every man in the place who can shuffle his feet is going to cut in on me."

Vicki smiled, pleased at the compliment. "But we mustn't get separated, Dusty. Every time our jester friend starts for the door one of us has got to trail him."

"You relax and have a good time," Dusty said generously. "He'll have to go to the men's cloakroom first to get something to wear over his costume. You can't follow him there, anyway."

Cars of every size, make and vintage were drawing up to Aunt Julie's wide-open front door. Vicki could hear the din of gay dance music mingling with loud laughter when they were still a block away. People in all kinds of costumes jammed the entrance and overflowed into the cobblestone street, and couples were already good-naturedly bumping into each other as they danced on the wrought-iron balcony overhead.

"Oh, my goodness," Vicki gasped. "We'll never be able to keep track of Paul in that crowd!"

"It's not going to be as easy as I thought," Dusty agreed. "Everyone in New Orleans must have been invited. Guess we'll have to plan a campaign. There are two exits from the parlour: French doors opening into the courtyard and folding doors to the hall. You keep an eye on the patio and I'll keep an eye on the corridor. If he starts to leave the room, one or the other of us most stop him with some sort of excuse. He won't try to sneak out of the house unless he's sure no one is watching him."

Vicki and Dusty were swept up by the crowd in front of the house and were carried with it to the patio where Aunt Julie was receiving her guests. As hostess she was not wearing a mask and neither was Marie, the guest of honour, who stood timidly beside her, a fragile flower in her dainty frock that looked as though it had been made of tier after tier of real rose petals.

Aunt Julie welcomed Vicki and Dusty effusively but the musicians, who had arranged themselves and their instruments on the balcony above the garden, were making so much noise Vicki couldn't hear a word she said. A trim maid in a rustling taffeta uniform led Vicki up the staircase to the bedroom where long racks were already filling up with ladies' cloaks. Dusty followed a white-haired butler to the adjoining room and came right out again. Vicki joined him in a minute and soon they were dancing in the long, lovely parlour.

"Did you see him?" Dusty asked. "I've counted eight jesters already."

Vicki's sharp eyes had been sweeping the room as she whirled in Dusty's arms and at that moment she saw the multicoloured tunic that Aunt Julie had pieced together with her fine stitches. And there was no mistaking short, fat Uncle Paul, although he wore a funny face and a bushy wig of orange-tinted hair. He was dancing with a tall, slender girl in a black and orange witch's costume who towered over him. But Paul Breaux, Vicki saw at once, although handicapped by his lack of height, was an exquisite dancer.

At that moment the music stopped and Paul and his partner disappeared through the French doors.

"Quick," Vicki whispered to Dusty. "We've lost him."

But they found him a few minutes later in the dining-room where a huge crystal punch bowl gleamed against the polished mahogany of a long buffet. Paul ladled out a glass of fruit juice for the tall young "witch," then bowed, leaving her with a laughing group of people who she evidently knew. Then he sidled away toward the garden with Vicki and Dusty right behind him. They caught up with him at the fountain and Dusty called out, disguising his voice:

"Yo, ho, my good jester, stop and tell us a joke."

Vicki, knowing she could not hide her own identity because Paul had seen her costume on Wednesday night, nevertheless played her part. She touched Paul lightly on the shoulder with her wand and said sweetly, "Where is your belled cap, sir? Did your witch steal it away from you?"

They could not see the expression on his face behind the mask with its ass's ears that fell down to his shoulders, but Vicki could guess from the tensing of his hand muscles that he was furious. He did not, however, guess that Vicki had previously seen his costume, for he replied in a deep, gruff voice:

"I left my cap upstairs, kind fairy, and am on my way to get it now. If you will excuse me."

The music started up again and Vicki planted herself firmly in front of him. "Nay, buffoon, tarry and dance with me. I have watched your feet twinkling to the music like dewdrops in the sunlight and crave the pleasure of being your partner."

There was nothing for Paul to do but lead Vicki back into the parlour where they waltzed until the intermission. Dusty joined them in front of the punch bowl and was forced to introduce his fairy queen to several young men who were clamouring to meet her. In the confusion, Paul melted away and this time Dusty, found him in the cloakroom. As he told Vicki later:

"He was slipping into a long black coat and said he wanted to go out in the street for a breath of air. I clung to him like a leech, chattering away like an idiot, but it worked. He finally gave up and now some dowagers have him cornered in the patio."

It went on like that all evening with Vicki and Dusty thwarting Paul's every attempt to leave the house. At last it was midnight and the unmasking began. Little tables appeared from nowhere and were set up in every nook and corner of the parlour and the patio. In the dining room Aunt Julie presided at one end of the long table with her brother at the other. Then the caterers, under the supervision of the old white-haired butler, began to serve the supper. Marie had requested that Vicki and Dusty be seated at the big table with her and her family and a few of Aunt Julie's best friends. Vicki found her name on a hand-painted place card with Paul on her left and Dusty on her right. She pretended to be very much surprised when she discovered that the jester she had danced with so often turned out to be her host.

"Why, Mr. Breaux," she said, "I had no idea you danced so beautifully." She couldn't help adding mischievously, "You could make a lot of money giving lessons."

He glanced at her, his pale eyes glittering with suppressed rage. "I give you up, mademoiselle," he said coldly. "You will never understand a Creole gentleman." He turned to the lady on his left and did not speak to Vicki again for the rest of the night.

Supper went on through course after course; then the little tables disappeared as miraculously as they had appeared, and the dancing began again. Vicki saw to her satisfaction that Paul was kept busy with little old ladies, plump dowagers, and other duties which he could not ignore as the hostess's brother.

The moonlight faded into the first pale light of dawn and at last the orchestra leader shouted from the balcony:

"Le bal est fini!"

Vicki and Dusty strolled back to the Breaux pension. Vicki was so delighted with the success of their scheme she hardly noticed how tired she was. "We fixed that sly old fox," she exulted. "It's too late for him to drive out to the plantation now. By the time Marie and I stop chattering about the ball it'll be broad daylight." She yawned. "And there's going to be a brunch party tomorrow—I mean today. At least Aunt Julie told me when we were leaving that she was coming over for a late breakfast. I can't imagine eating again until noon."

"I can't either," Dusty agreed. "That was some feast—a banquet to end all banquets."

They turned a corner and Vicki gasped, "Oh, my stars, Dusty! There's Paul's old Ford parked in front of the pension. Do you suppose he plans to drive out to Magnolia Manor as soon we go to sleep?"

"No," Dusty assured her. "He had to leave the car out because the garage doesn't open until nine. I'll bet he's already turned in. He was practically asleep on his feet when he dragged Marie away from the party a few minutes ago. He won't open an eye until Aunt Julie arrives for brunch."

Sarah, in wrapper and nightcap, answered Vicki's knock and confirmed what Dusty had said. "M'sieu is already snoring," she whispered. "He is so lazy, that one, I am sure he went to bed in his costume. But Marie is wide awake and waiting for a gumbo ya-ya with you, Miss Vicki."

Vicki stepped up over the sill and said good-bye to Dusty. "When will you hear from your friends about the helicopter?" she asked.

"As soon as they get back from Baton Rouge," Dusty told her. "I'll call you the minute they let me know whether I can borrow it or not."

Sarah discreetly moved away from them to the other end of the corridor and Vicki said quietly:

"Suppose they won't lend it to you, Dusty? We can't risk letting another night go by without rescuing Bill and searching that secret room."

"I know it," Dusty said soberly. "What Paul couldn't do last night, he's sure to do tonight unless we have him arrested first."

"And we can't do that," Vicki sighed. "Not without Bill's testimony. You've just got to get that helicopter, Dusty."

"I will," Dusty promised her. "Fais dodo, ma petite," he said with a sleepy grin. "Go to sleep, little one."

"Go to sleep yourself," Vicki said between a smile and a yawn. "And if a cat follows you home, don't for heaven's sake chase it away."

CHAPTER XVI

A Confession

DUSTY'S LUCK HELD IN SPITE OF THE FACT THAT HE WAS not followed home by a cat. Sarah was serving an informal breakfast in the patio to Vicki, Marie and her uncle and aunt, when the phone rang. Paul, in bad spirits, because, he said, he had not had enough sleep went into the office to answer it.

When he came back he said grudgingly to Vicki, "It's for you. You should teach your beaus not to annoy us by calling in the midst of a meal."

"Why, Uncle Paul," Marie gasped in a shocked voice. "How can you say such a thing to our Vicki? It is not yet noon and our regular time for lunch is one-thirty."

Her uncle strode across the patio on his short, fat legs to stand over her with a threatening scowl. "Enough of your impertinence, mademoiselle! Since you have become a young lady have you forgotten all the manners I taught you?"

As Vicki hurried into the office she heard Aunt Julie say with a hearty laugh, "Pay no attention to him, chérie. You know how he is when he has not slept the clock around."

But Vicki knew that Paul's bad temper was not due to lack of sleep. She knew that he must be boiling inwardly, and she also knew why. She picked up the phone and said, "Hello" into the mouthpiece.

"Hi, Pint Size," Dusty greeted her so cheerfully that she guessed at once what he was going to say. "Our helicopter will be at the airport in an hour."

"Wonderful," Vicki cried. "Is it all right if I ask Marie to come along?"

"You can try," Dusty said, "but what about Paul?"

"He's as cross as a bear," Vicki admitted. "But Aunt Julie is here. Maybe she can talk him into it."

"She can if anybody can," Dusty said. "I'll stop by for you in fifteen minutes."

Back in the garden Vicki said, staring straight into Paul's little puffy eyes, "That was Dusty. He's taking me sight-seeing by helicopter. I think it would be nice if Marie came with us, don't you?"

For a moment Vicki thought Marie's uncle was going to burst with rage and astonishment. Before he could think of a thing to say, Aunt Julie decided the matter:

"Sight-seeing by helicopter? But what a marvellous idea, Vicki. If I were not so fat I would beg you to let me ride in one of those things with you. And of course Marie shall go. It is an experience not to be missed."

Paul whirled around to face his sister. "I will not permit it. It is unseemly and dangerous."

Aunt Julie leaned forward to shake a plump finger under her brother's nose. "It is no more unseemly than riding in that ancient Ford of yours, and not half so dangerous. In fact, it is just the thing that you yourself should do. Perhaps the rarefied air above the earth might clear the cobwebs out of your brain."

He clenched his fists against his sides and repeated stubbornly, "I will not permit it. I will not permit it."

Aunt Julie went on as though she had not been interrupted. "The matter is settled. Marie goes. She is now eighteen and has been presented to our friends. Run along, chérie, and change into that pretty linen suit that just came back from the dressmaker's."

Marie hesitated for a second and then flew up the staircase like a bird that has just been freed from a cage.

Paul was saying in a taut voice, "If she disobeys me and leaves this house, Julie, I will not permit her to return to it."

"Good, good," his sister said easily. "Just put that in writing, Paul, and I shall notify my lawyer that you wish to be relieved of your guardianship. I can then start adoption proceedings as I have long wanted to do."

Instantly the old man's whole manner changed. He seemed to crumple in his rocking chair. "Pay no attention to me, Julie," he said, wiping his perspiring forehead with the back of one hand. "I am tired—the party last night—my head aches so frightfully that I think I shall spend the rest of the day in bed. Of course our little Marie shall go with Miss Vicki for a ride in the air. I shall go and tell her so now to put her mind at rest."

He trudged wearily up the staircase and in a few minutes Marie came down, fairly dancing, her oval face alight with happiness. "I can't wait, Vicki," she cried. "A helicopter! Why, I have never been higher in the air than the top floor of this house."

"I've never been up in a helicopter either," Vicki said with a smile, "but Dusty has been telling me about them. He says it takes both hands and both feet to work the controls, and a 'windmill,' as he calls them, can stand still in the air, go straight up and down, and even back up."

"Now that," Aunt Julie put in with a chuckle, "sounds like a machine which I shall buy when I get too fat to walk. . . . Ah, that must be Dusty at the door now. Run and let him in, Marie."

Vicki looked surprised. "But what about the key?" she asked. "Isn't the door kept locked any more?"

"All of that foolishness is finished," Aunt Julie said emphatically. "I had it out with my brother before you came down this morning. Marie is not to be kept locked in like a prisoner for one more day. And if he must keep his precious old parlour and office locked, he will have duplicate keys made for both Sarah and Marie." She winked one black eye at Vicki. "Things will be very different from now on, Vicki, for Marie, you see, is eighteen now."

"*Things are going to be a lot more different,*" Vicki reflected, "*if I find Uncle Etienne's last will and testament with Paul's signature as a witness on it.*"

Vicki felt as though she must have spoken her thoughts, for Aunt Julie was talking about a will now, her own will.

"I have left everything to Marie, but naturally," she said. "And I see no reason why she should wait until I die to have a little income of her own. When her Bill comes back from New York, we will have a gay wedding in my home, and Marie shall have as handsome a dowry as any Creole young lady ever had."

Vicki could not resist bending down and swiftly kissing Aunt Julie's smooth cheek. "And you," she said, "are the most wonderful Creole lady in the whole French Quarter."

Marie came back with Dusty then, and half an hour later they were peering through the plexiglass nose section of the helicopter as Dusty guided it up and over the airfield. The engine roared and the rotor blades overhead windmilled furiously. Vicki soon found out that flying in a helicopter was not at all like flying in a big airliner. The "eggbeater" seemed like a tippy, unstable air boat to her, but Marie didn't seem to mind at all as it rocked and swayed.

"This is the most exciting thing that ever happened to me," she confided to Vicki. "It would be perfect if only Bill were with us."

Vicki was tempted to tell her that she suspected Bill would soon be occupying the fourth seat in the ship, but suppose she had been wrong in her suspicions all along and Bill really was in New York after all? The disappointment to Marie would be too cruel, so Vicki held her tongue.

Now they were approaching the winding driveway that led to the mansion, flying so low that Vicki felt as though she could reach down and touch the top leaves of the live oaks. Suddenly Marie drew in her breath and pointed:

"Why, that's Uncle Paul's car down there. Look behind us, Vicki. It's parked under the trees just around that bend."

Vicki looked and saw the old Ford sedan, half hidden by the moss-hung branches. For a moment panic seized her. Had Paul guessed that they were going to rescue Bill? Had he driven right out to the plantation, under the pretext of going to his room for a nap, desperate now to find and destroy that will?

Vicki could not bear to think of any harm coming to friendly old Boots and was just about to suggest to Dusty that they land at Magnolia Manor first when she saw the night watchman. He was tilted back in a chair on the east veranda, eating a leisurely lunch with the chipped enamel pot of coffee beside his big feet.

He stared up at them with no more surprise on his weather-beaten face than if the helicopter had been a wild duck en route to the marsh. Vicki waved and yelled, "Hello," and Boots grinned back. He waved a half-eaten sandwich at her, looking so much like the Mad Hatter in *Alice in Wonderland* that she laughed and momentarily forgot that Paul Breaux must be lurking around the grounds somewhere.

"Well," she thought, "he can't do anything to Boots in the broad daylight. Besides, Boots must look like a giant to that mean little kewpie."

Her thoughts were interrupted by a gasp of surprise from Marie as her sharp eyes spotted another car, almost completely hidden by the cypress trees below them—a little blue Bantam, mired hub-deep in a quagmire of Dixie Swamp.

"The Bug!" Marie's dark eyes flash with excitement. "Bill's back!"

Vicki said nothing but stared down at the bayou village over which they were hovering. Except that it had grown up around a creek in a coastal swamp, it looked like any other small, rural community, where poor people lived happily in rude shacks with their numerous children and neighbours. Ducks, chickens and cattle roamed the narrow streets, and dogs barked threateningly up at the helicopter. Their masters, however, were grinning delightedly and pointing with shouts of welcome to a cleared space where the ship could land.

There were so many Cajuns, ranging from toddlers to very old men and women, that Vicki did not at first recognize Saint and Doucette. And it was Marie who discovered Bill in that laughing, shouting throng.

He was dressed like the Cajuns in dungarees and a blue shirt, and his upturned face was tanned to a deep brown. He beckoned with both hands, yelling at the top of his lungs, but nobody in the helicopter could hear what he said in that uproar.

Slowly but surely Dusty brought the "eggbeater" down. Bill elbowed his way through the crowd and helped Marie out as though she were the only occupant. Vicki watched them for a moment as they gazed lovingly into each other's eyes, and then she cornered Saint.

The Cajun boy's black eyes twinkled merrily as she said, trying hard to sound stern, "Saint St. Clair, you played ghost at Magnolia Manor a week ago last night, and don't you dare deny it."

"Mais, non, mademoiselle," he chuckled. "I do not deny anything. Miz Saint herself told you the next day that I played the good joke."

Dusty joined them then and said soberly, "A joke is one thing, Saint, but kidnapping, keeping someone in your village against his will, is another."

Little Doucette, like a ruffled hen, flew to her husband's defence. She gesticulated wildly, dropping back and forth from French to English. "We keep nobody here against his will, m'sieu. The gentleman, he was very sick, what you say, out of his mind, when my Saint found him. And, oh, so big a bump on the back of his head. When he talk, he do not make the good sense."

Saint, very serious now, nodded his head up and down. "Miz Saint speaks the truth, mademoiselle. I found your friend, M. Graham, on Sunday at dusk. He was lying half in and half out of our bayou, and he was burning with fever. What can I do? Leave him there to die? Non, mademoiselle."

Doucette tossed her mop of dark wavy hair. "He brought him home to me, mademoiselle. I am a good nurse. At first he wants to leave and go back to his sweetheart, but I do not permit him to get out of bed. I put a bandage on his head and make him drink many cups of herb tea. Soon the swelling goes down and he is not so hot when I feel his temple. But he still does not make the good sense when he talks."

Saint took up the tale. "By this time, mademoiselle and m'sieu, it is the middle of the week. As Miz Saint says, your friend does not make the good sense. Every morning I must tell him all over again how I found him in the bayou burning with fever. And every morning he forgets and cannot understand why he is in our home and sleeping in our bed. So I am worried and I paddle my pirogue to the next village and bring back M. le Docteur. He look at your friend's wound and shake his head and say that he must stay here and rest for many more days. That is how it was." Saint stood very straight, his head held high, daring anyone to doubt his word.

If the situation had not been so serious Vicki would have burst into a peal of laughter. She felt as though she had been watching two excellent actors play a scene which they had rehearsed many times. And then Bill, with Marie clinging ecstatically to his arm, joined the group.

"So you know my host and hostess?" he said, smiling at the young St. Clairs. "They've been very kind to me; as a matter of fact, a little too kind. I've been perfectly well the last couple of days."

"Have you really been sick?" Vicki demanded. "What happened to you, Bill? Begin at the beginning please!"

They gathered around him on the stoop of the St. Clairs' shanty and Bill said, "I really don't know what happened, Vic. But it began with Boots. He called me right after I'd gone to bed Friday night, frightened out of his wits because there was a headless thing flitting around the mansion. Said he was quitting, so I got dressed and drove right out. I opened the front door and then something must have fallen on me because I felt a splitting pain in the back of my head and then I drew a blank. When I came to I was wandering around in the swamp, half-dazed. I don't know what day that was, but it was growing dark so I knew I hadn't a chance of getting out of that labyrinth. I thought about Marie and that made me think of you and Dusty, Vic, and I decided my only hope was to signal an S O S to the first plane that flew overhead. Several of them came along and I signalled to them all with my flashlight, and then I got dizzy, stumbled and fell. The next thing I knew I was in bed in this very shack with Doucette nursing me. I was all mixed up and the only thing I could remember was sending an S O S to a plane. Just then one roared overhead and I rushed out to signal to it with my flashlight. Doucette and Saint dragged me back to bed and I promptly fainted again."

"Oh, mon cher," Marie cried. "You had such a time!"

Bill grinned. "I must have been a tough patient. The St. Clairs tell me I kept coming to and drawing blanks and trying to get away, but I don't remember anything until the doctor came. He said I'd had a pretty serious concussion and wasn't over it yet. That was Wednesday. I felt all right, a little rocky, and I begged him to let me go home, but he said I had to rest for several more days. I didn't argue. What was the use? I kept on signalling every evening to planes until my flashlight battery went dead last night. I guess you got my last signal, Dusty?"

Dusty nodded. "It was pretty weak, but we got it."

"But why," Marie said severely to Saint, "did you not bring me a message from Mr. Graham?"

Saint looked surprised. "Did not your uncle tell you? I myself went to the pension on Sunday to inform him that I had found the gentleman sick and wounded in the swamp. He advised me to keep him in our home until he was well and strong again, and offered to pay Miz Saint for nursing him back to health."

"Mr. Breaux did more than advise and offer," Vicki interrupted drily. "You know very well, Saint, he *told* you to keep Mr. Graham here and *paid* you for doing it."

Marie gasped and Bill looked at Vicki as though she had lost her mind. Doucette giggled, but it was a nervous giggle, and Vicki turned to her sternly:

"That was a pretty tale you told me in the air last Saturday morning, Doucette, but it didn't fool me very long. Mr. Breaux gave you the money for that trip and he paid well, for he had hired your husband to scare the night watchman away from Magnolia Manor and then to hit Mr. Graham on the head just as he came in the door." From the corner of her eye she watched the expression on Saint's face and saw that her accusations had the effect she had hoped for.

Saint jumped to his feet, wildly gesticulating in denial. "Non, non, mademoiselle. It was M. Breaux who hit the gentleman on the head. I saw him do it from where I was hiding on the west veranda. He did not know that I came back to spy on him. I went down to my pirogue after he had paid me, but I was so curious I came back to find out why he had given me so much money to play ghost. M. Graham was coming up the front steps with his flashlight. He opened the door and then I saw that M. Breaux was waiting inside in the darkness with a piece of lead pipe held high over his head."

Marie had turned as white as a sheet and Bill grabbed Saint's arm. "Are you speaking the truth? This is a very serious matter, Saint. Watch your step."

Tears of fright welled up in the boy's black eyes and his lower lip trembled. "It *is* the truth, m'sieu. I do not like to say this in the presence of M. Breaux's niece, but I must protect myself. If he is saying that it was I who hit you on the head with that lead pipe, I will go to the police and tell them everything I know." He turned to Vicki. "You are right, mademoiselle, M. Breaux did pay me fifty dollars to keep your friend here for one week. But I would have taken care of your friend for nothing. When I found him lying beside the bayou I thought at first that he might be dead. I was frightened and came back to the village for help. My friend Henri and I carried the gentleman to our home and left him with Miz Saint who said he was not dead and that she could cure him with her herb tea. I thought to myself, Miz Saint and I are not rich. It is M. Breaux's fault that the gentleman has the fever and the big wound on his head. He should pay for his care. So my friend Henri drove me right into the city in his car and I told M. Breaux what I knew."

Bill interrupted with his hearty "Ho, ho, ho! You're a smart guy, Saint. Some people might call it blackmail, but I call what you did good common sense." He sobered suddenly. "Get back to that pretty little scene at the mansion on Friday night. It was twenty minutes past twelve by the clock on the Bug's dashboard when I drove up. I'd like to know what happened between then and when you found me in the bayou around eight on Sunday evening."

"I cannot tell you everything m'sieu," Saint said, not nearly so frightened since Bill had laughed. "I saw M. Breaux strike you with that heavy pipe and you pitched forward on your face. I thought that he had killed you and I ran away down the swamp road. And then I heard the sound of a car coming. I hid in the cypress trees. It was M. Breaux driving your little blue Bantam. You were propped up on the seat beside him with your chin on your chest, like this, and your head wobbled from side to side as he drove down, down, until I could no longer see the tail-lights of the car. I took the short cut to where I had left my pirogue and paddled home as fast as I could. I was glad that M. Breaux had given me extra money, saying that Miz Saint and I should take a trip by air that very morning. I wanted to get away from the swamp, so we dressed at once and drove to the airport."

"You were an accessory before the fact, Saint," Vicki said, frowning. "You should have notified the police."

Saint clutched his thick black hair with both hands. "I know, mademoiselle, but I was afraid of what they might do to me. M. Breaux is a Creole gentleman, a member of an old family, and I am nothing but a hunter and fisherman. They would have asked me many questions. What was I doing in the mansion at midnight? How did I know about that secret door?"

Vicki leaned forward, her elbow on her knees, her chin in her hand. "How *did* you know about that secret door, Saint?"

"What secret door?" Marie and Bill demanded.

Vicki told them, starting with her first suspicions that Marie's great-uncle either had added a codicil to his second will, or had made out a third will. She repeated what Mme de Fres had told her, and why she had guessed that the old family strongbox with the long-lost papers must be hidden somewhere in the parlour wall. When she described how she had pressed the button that made the blackboard of the library bookcase move inward, Saint nodded his head up and down, grinning.

"That is how I found it, too, mademoiselle," he admitted. "Often my friend Henri and I, when we were younger, climbed in through the cellar window and played hide-and-seek in that old deserted house. I myself borrowed many books, but I always returned them. Then one day I stood admiring the beautiful design in the mahogany uprights and I ran my fingers down them like this. And suddenly I saw that there was no flower where there should be one, only a smooth round knob. I pressed it as you did, mademoiselle, but much harder and without thinking. Then voilà! there I am in a tiny room, staring at a rusty metal box."

"Did you open the box?" Vicki demanded.

Saint looked horrified. "Mais, non, mademoiselle, I would not do such a thing. It is not a crime if a poor boy borrows a few books, hein? But to break even so rusty a lock, that is something else again." He drew himself up proudly, his black eyes flashing. "I never even returned to the house after that, until last Friday night when I play the ghost. M. Breaux, he say he will not pay me one penny if I do not make the old night watchman run away. And how am I to do that unless I fade into the wall as though I do not have the flesh and bones?"

Bill laughed. "You're a character, Saint," he said, clapping the boy on the shoulder. "And you and your wife have been very good to me. Don't you worry about a thing. Paul Breaux is the man who should be punished and I mean to see that he is."

Marie bit her lip to keep it from trembling. "I knew that my uncle cheated at cards and did not always pay his bills, but I never thought he would do such a thing to you, mon cher." She laid her small hand on Bill's arm. "It is right that he should be punished."

"It's the way he treated you that makes me wild," Bill rejoined.

"I think we ought to fly back to Magnolia Manor right away," Vicki reminded them. "We saw Paul's car parked near the entrance when we flew over a few minutes ago."

"Je*ho*shaphat!" Bill yelled. "Then we'd better make it snappy. If he bopped *me* on the head he wouldn't hesitate to knock out old Boots." He grabbed Marie's hand and started for the helicopter at a run.

Dusty and Vicki raced after them and Vicki's heart was pounding. She remembered how light Paul was on his feet and how he could move as swiftly and stealthily as a cat when he wanted to.

Was he even now creeping up behind Boots as the old watchman made the rounds of the house?

CHAPTER XVII

The Secret in the Wall

THE BIG FOUR-BLADE ROTOR WINDMILLED AND THE HELIcopter rose above the Cajun village amid shouts and laughter and the barking of dogs. Vicki and Bill and Marie waved to Saint and Doucette until they lost sight of them in the cypress trees of Dixie Swamp. Dusty, busy with the sticks and pedals, could only yell:

"Good-bye, kids. Keep out of mischief if you can."

Bill chuckled. "Mischief is the word. Saint didn't do anything you and I wouldn't have been tempted to do at his age, Dusty. I've broken into more boarded-up houses than you can count on the fingers of both hands."

"Me too," Dusty agreed. "And as for playing ghost, up until a few years ago I used to scare my girl cousins to death wandering around at night wrapped in a sheet."

Vicki smiled in spite of her worry about Boots. "The only thing Saint did wrong was not to report Paul's attack on Bill to the police. And I can understand why he was fraid to do that, under the circumstances."

"Oh, I can too," Marie said. "And most Cajuns are afraid of the police on general principles, anyway." Her face was radiant as she added, "Oh, Vicki, you are so wonderful to have found my Bill."

Vicki was too worried to reply for they were hovering above the mansion now, and there was no sign of Boots. His chair was still on the east veranda and beside it was the coffeepot and his pipe, ashes spilled out of the bowl as though he had dropped it in haste.

As Dusty brought the "eggbeater" straight down to land on the front lawn, Vicki peered at the workmen's shack, wondering if perhaps the old watchman had gone in there for a brief after-lunch nap. But the padlock on the door was securely in place.

No, Boots must have been interrupted while he was peacefully smoking his pipe, for she knew that he was too tidy to have left it and the coffeepot on the porch without a good reason.

She was the first one out of the helicopter and raced up the wide front steps with the others right behind her. The door was unlocked. On the threshold Vicki stopped and held her finger to her lips.

"Sh-h," she whispered. "Something's happened to Boots. Otherwise he would have come out to greet us."

"You're right," Bill whispered back, his pleasant face drawn with worry. "If Paul Breaux has harmed a hair of that old man's head, I'll, I'll——"

"Stop it, fella," Dusty interrupted. "We have to find Paul first."

"And Uncle Paul, mon cher," Marie whispered gently, "is still here. For just before we landed I caught a glimpse of the old Ford down near the entrance."

"So did I," Vicki cried. "He must have heard us coming and hid. If we tiptoe down the hall I bet we'll find him in the secret room."

She led the way and they followed, making no sound on the canvas that covered the floor. The library looked just as it had when Vicki saw it on Wednesday afternoon. Swiftly she stepped between the book boxes and pressed her finger on the button of the secret door. That section of the bookcase moved slowly inward—and then stopped, for someone was on the other side. Someone was crouching there in the darkness, and Vicki felt strong hands on her shoulders as the boys drew her away from the entrance. It was Bill who spoke first.

"Come on out, Mr. Breaux," he said, his temper under full control now. "We don't want to hurt you, but if you don't come out by the time I've counted to ten, we'll drag you out. One . . . two . . . three . . ."

Paul Breaux emerged at the count of nine, cringing like a whipped dog as he stepped through the secret entrance, blinking in the sunlight that poured in through the west windows. The minute he was in the library Vicki darted behind him into the secret room. The lid on the old family strongbox had been torn away from its lock and rusty hinges, and papers lay helter-skelter all over the floor of the cubbyhole in the wall. Vicki scooped them up and, with the box under one arm, came back into the big room.

Paul's pale eyes darted from the papers she began at once to sort, to Bill's sturdy arms and Dusty's broad shoulders. He ran his tongue around his tightly drawn mouth.

"I think," he said, trying hard to smile, "that there has been some misunderstanding. You young people do not realize that the documents Miss Vicki is so carefully arranging cannot be of any possible interest to anyone but me." He uttered a low laugh like the growl of an ill-tempered dog that has had a bone snatched from its jaws. "Give them to me, Miss Vicki, at once, for it is growing late and I must get back to the pension."

Bill said evenly, "Don't move, Mr. Breaux. You're not going back to the pension. You're going to jail. For assault and battery."

Marie spoke up then, almost sorrowfully, Vicki thought. "There is no use in pretending, mon oncle. The young Cajun boy, Saint, has told us everything." She covered her face with her small hands. "Oh, Uncle Paul, how could you have done such a dreadful thing to my Bill?"

Gruffly he replied in rapid French, but Marie only shook her head. "It is no use, mon oncle. The Cajun boy will testify in court if necessary, and Vicki has proof that the letter you wrote to Jacobson is a forgery."

Paul Breaux whirled to face Vicki and the boys grabbed his arms, one on each side. Vicki said quietly:

"I don't need the forged letter. Here is your great-uncle's will, Marie. Just glance at the codicil and your uncle's signature as a witness below it. He cannot deny that he has known all these years that Magnolia Manor belonged to you."

Marie refused to look at the long, yellowed sheet of parchment, but Bill took it from Vicki and read the fine handwriting in the codicil. Marie said quickly, "I care nothing about Magnolia Manor, Bill, or the money my uncle got from the sale of it. He is more than welcome to it. But I cannot forgive him for what he did to you."

Bill unleashed his redheaded temper then. "I don't care what he did to me. I'd be willing to forget it, if that was his only crime. But he's going to be punished for trying to cheat you out of your inheritance, even if I have to take the matter to the Supreme Court!"

"You won't have to do anything like that, sonny," a voice drawled from the doorway. It was Boots, and standing beside him was Jacobson, fuming with rage.

"I should say not," the peppery little foreman barked. "Boots here will prefer charges for assault and battery and I'll back him up, Mr. Graham!"

Everybody, even Paul Breaux, turned to face the two men in the library doorway. "What do you know about all this, Jacobson?" Bill demanded tautly.

"Plenty," the stocky foreman replied. "About twenty minutes ago I called to tell Boots to expect a shipment of wallpaper late this afternoon. The phone rang and rang. Just as I was about to check with the operator to see if she was ringing the wrong number, somebody answered." He laughed without humour. "Somebody who was so obviously disguising his voice that I smelled a rat at once. In the first place, Boots's big feet can carry him to the phone in less than a minute even if he's out in the shack. In the second place, he never answers with anything but, 'Boots speaking. What can I do for you?'" Jacobson pointed a stubby finger at Paul Breaux. "He was the one who answered, he with his French accent and his ''Allo, 'allo.' I'd know his voice anywhere."

"Well, now, Jake," Boots said mildly, "you didn't guess who it was until you passed Mr. Breaux's Ford down on the driveway. And I didn't know who had thrown those pebbles at the shack until I came to with a gag in my mouth while he was tying me up." His big shoulders shook with silent laughter. "An old-timer like me falling for that one! I was sitting there on the veranda smoking my after-lunch pipe as cosy as could be when all of a sudden I hear a rat-a-tat-tat down by the shed. I jumped right up thinking that a rat might be caught in that trap I'd set to keep the varmint from eating my sugar, but instead of me catching a varmint, it was that varmint over there that caught me." He flicked a contemptuous glance at Paul, who was nervously wiping his perspiring face. Vicki guessed that Boots's drawl was a thin veil over his outraged feelings that he had been tricked and struck from behind. He went on in a more menacing tone of voice:

"So I ambled down to the shed and took off the padlock. Then I saw stars, not star *dust*, Miss Vicki. When I came to, that fat old man had already stuck a filthy rag in my mouth and had just about finished trussing me up. I kept my eyes shut, not letting on I knew what he was doing. But as soon as he'd locked me in and gone away, I started wriggling to the door. When I finally got there I kicked it fit to break it down, until Jake, here, came and let me loose."

Jacobson again laughed humourlessly. "I drove right out, Mr. Graham, when Boots didn't answer the phone, knowing something was wrong. First I saw that old sedan parked just off the driveway, then I saw a helicopter sitting on the lawn, then I heard Boots's big feet hammering on the shed door. I unlocked the padlock with my own key, and here we are. If Boots is too lazy to take three steps to the phone and call the police, I will!"

At that moment Paul Breaux jerked away from the boys and bolted for the French doors leading to the west veranda. But he had to pass Vicki and she quickly stuck out one small foot to trip him up. He sprawled headlong and Jacobson pounced on him before he could get his breath.

Marie shut her eyes, clenching her hands to her mouth. "Let us go, mon cher," she begged Bill. "These two men will see that justice is done. I can no longer bear the sight of one of my family in such disgrace."

Bill gently tucked her little hand in the crook of his arm and led her out of the room. Vicki and Dusty followed them. Before they had crossed the threshold, Boots had picked up the phone and was drawling:

"Operator? Would you do me the kindness, miss, of getting me police headquarters? That is, if it wouldn't put you out too much."

Vicki felt like laughing and crying at once. Marie's troubles were over; happiness lay ahead of her. But she would not soon forget the déshonneur Paul had brought to the whole Breaux family.

CHAPTER XVIII

Home Again

SPRINGTIME IN FAIRVIEW, VICKI DECIDED AS SIX WEEKS later she rode up the curving driveway to The Castle in a cab, was even more beautiful than it was in New Orleans. The blossoms falling from the apple trees had "snowed" all over the green grass, filling the air with their fragrance. The sky was very blue except for fleecy cumulus clouds, big white cauliflowers chasing each other in the wind. A robin swooped from a budding green tree in the rock garden and stopped for a dainty drink at the stone birdbath.

And then Freckles, his silky ears flying behind him, came dashing down to threaten the cab with all sorts of dire punishments. One of the casement windows opened as though it had been jet propelled and Ginny's voice shouted:

"Vic. *Vic*! Is that you?"

"What's left of me," Vicki shouted back as she paid the driver, badly handicapped by the brown-and-white spaniel's leaps and barks of welcome. "Come save me from this animal. He's ruined my best skirt."

"I'll be right down," Ginny said. "But it's you who'll have to save me, Vic. Oh, I'm in such a terrible mess!"

In another minute she was smothering her sister with kisses, groaning, "Why did I ever do it? If you hadn't come back today, I couldn't have stood it another minute. Fudge, fudge, *fudge*! And Cookie Walker quitting just when I need her most!"

"Why, pet," Vicki said, hugging her tightly, "you're actually crying. It couldn't be as bad as that."

"Oh, but it is," Ginny insisted, taking off her glasses, which were fogged by her tears. "All of your friends in New York ordered boxes, two apiece, and Mrs. Duff sent me the money in advance for all of them. And I spent half the money, Vic, for sugar and chocolate. I *had* to. And then that whole batch burned. I don't know why, except that Dad was trying to make some gumbo from that recipe you sent him, at the same time. He kept getting in my way and saying that I was getting in *his* way, and we got to laughing, and suddenly both of our pots had boiled all over the stove. Mother was *perfectly furious*."

Vicki grinned. "I can imagine she was, honey, but she never stays cross very long. So why didn't you simply clean up the mess and start all over again?"

"I did," Ginny moaned, "and that batch was simply scrumptious, super-dee-licious. I packed it very carefully away in twelve boxes lined with wax paper and everything. I even printed the label with Mrs. Duff's name and address and wrapped all the boxes together in brown paper and tied the bundle with the strongest string I could find." She collapsed weeping on a stone bench in the rock garden. "I took it to the post office myself, Vicki," she wailed. "But it never arrived. I just got a letter from Mrs. Duff today saying it hadn't. And when Mother and Dad come back from the meeting——" Whatever she was going to say was lost in sobs.

Vicki sat down beside her and pulled her into her arms. "There, there, baby," she crooned. "Everybody makes mistakes. You must have sent the package to the wrong address, but if you put a return address on it the post office will let you know. And the fudge will stay nice and fresh since you wrapped it in wax paper."

Ginny was immediately all smiles. "Oh, Vic! I never thought about that. Then everything's going to be all right after all?"

Vicki nodded. "Come on upstairs to our room and help me unpack. I brought you some pecan pralines from New Orleans. I'll bet you're sick of the sight of fudge."

"I am," Ginny admitted ruefully. "I never want to see another piece as long as I live. And I've gotten so fat from tasting every batch I can hardly squeeze into my clothes. Do you think I ought to diet, Vic, so I can get nice and slim like you?"

"Not until you've eaten these pralines," Vicki said. "When do you expect Mother and Dad back? They wired me they couldn't meet me at the station on account of an important meeting. I was kind of disappointed. It seems like ages since I've been home."

"They'll be back around supper-time," Ginny said, curling up on her bed with a package of pralines. "Dad's got a surprise for you. Oysters 'R' in season, so I'll bet you can guess what we're having for supper. Hope you're not as sick of 'em as I am of fudge."

"I'm not," Vicki said. "I didn't get a chance to grow sick of Creole cooking because, as you know, Marie went to stay with her aunt and I moved to a hotel after Paul Breaux's arrest."

"Tell me all about that all over again, Vic," Ginny said between munches. "Your letters were so skimpy, and you never wrote a line about the wedding."

"I didn't have a chance, honey," Vicki said with a laugh. "I flew to New York the day after the wedding. And the day after *that* I flew to Chicago. And here I am!"

"Well, tell me about the wedding now," Ginny insisted. "Did Marie look beautiful and did Bill manage to keep his red hair slicked down?"

"Yes to both," Vicki told her. "And I was the only bridesmaid and Dusty was best man. Marie wore her Aunt Julie's wedding gown of white satin underneath yards and yards of lovely old rose point. After their honeymoon they're going to live in New York so I expect to see them between assignments."

"Then the work on the mansion is finished?" Ginny asked. "The wall was torn down and now it's a night club?"

"That's right," Vicki said. "And it's one of the most beautiful inns I ever saw. Aunt Julie gave a supper dance out there for Bill and Marie the night before the wedding because she only invited a few old friends to the ceremony. It was small and quiet on account of Paul, you know. Aunt Julie and Marie don't talk about him at all, but I know they both feel the disgrace very keenly."

"Did Marie get any of the money from the sale of the plantation, or had he spent it all?" practical Ginny asked.

Vicki laughed. "She got most of it. It seems that even when he had the money Uncle Paul just couldn't bring himself to pay his bills."

"I hope the judge sends him to jail for the rest of his life," Ginny said emphatically. "Did he finally confess to everything, Vic?"

"Yes, he did," Vicki said. "And one thing I will say for Paul is that he didn't bring Saint into it. He took the blame for everything himself. He even said that he played ghost without anybody's help."

"What happened that exciting night, anyway?" Ginny wanted to know. "It seems to me that everybody in New Orleans must have been roaming around the mansion that night. Saint, Paul, Bill, Boots——"

Vicki chuckled. "And in exactly that order, too. First Saint scared Boots away. Boots telephoned Bill and then walked and hitch-hiked his way back to town. Paul left the pension at midnight and saw the old night watchman trudging along the road. He met Saint on the west veranda, paid him and told him to leave the city on the first flight in the morning, hoping that such an unusual trip would make Saint talk about it instead of his ghost act. Saint walked away down to the swamp, but he crept back, as you know, but Paul didn't know that. Paul went right in the parlour and began knocking on the wall to see if he could find a hollow spot. Then he heard Bill in the Bug coming up the driveway. He hid behind the door, knocked him out, dragged him to the Bug, and drove down the swamp road. He put Bill's flashlight in his pocket so he wouldn't stumble into the quicksand in the darkness, and then he left him at a twisting turn in the labyrinth where he would be sure to get lost and stay lost for a couple of days. Then he parked the Bug in a clearing where nobody could see it from the mansion. All of that took time so it was almost dawn when he started to test the parlour wall again."

"And then Boots came back in a taxi," Ginny intertupted. "But why didn't Paul knock out Boots then and there?"

"I guess he would have," Vicki said, "but he didn't dare. Because the taxi, making the complete circuit of the house, passed the old Breaux sedan in the back. Boots would have started an investigation to find out who struck him down and the taxi driver would certainly have volunteered the information that he had seen an ancient Ford on the back driveway."

"But there wouldn't have been any investigation," Ginny argued, "if Paul had dragged Boots down to the swamp too."

"He couldn't do that for several reasons," Vicki explained. "Boots is much taller and heavier than Bill for one thing. Also, the two of them working together could have got out of the swamp that morning, before Paul had time to find the will. And Paul ran very little risk when he got rid of Bill for the weekend. He knows only a few people in New Orleans and nobody would have wondered about his whereabouts until Monday morning. Marie *did* worry, as it turned out, because of the note Bill sent her by the street vendor, but there wasn't anything she could do about it."

"I see," Ginny said thoughtfully. "Paul didn't dare get rid of Boots for the weekend because Jacobson or somebody else might have called the plantation and got suspicious when nobody answered the phone. Then he would have started an investigation and the taxi driver would have told about seeing that old Ford."

Vicki nodded. "Boots is really the hero of the story. If he hadn't come back when he did, Paul would have found and destroyed the will that Saturday. And nobody would have known who played ghost or who struck Bill down."

Ginny giggled. "Boots is the hero, but you're the heroine, Vic. Gosh, you were smart to figure it all out and catch Paul in the act."

"I wasn't so smart," Vicki argued, "as I was lucky. If I hadn't been an airline stewardess I wouldn't have seen the Bug or Bill's signal. I wouldn't have been able to check with Marion Delbeau to find out that Bill wasn't on her flight. And I wouldn't have known someone like Dusty who can fly a helicopter."

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"All right, all right." Ginny grinned. "The answer to everything is that you're an airline stewardess." She bounced off the bed as they heard the sound of a car coming up the driveway. "Here come Mother and Dad. And don't you dare not act surprised when he produces that gooey oyster dish."

In another minute Vicki was hugging and kissing her parents in the living-room. Professor Barr's eyes twinkled as he said in a very poor imitation of a southern accent:

"It sho' is good to have you back, honey chile."

"It sho' is good to be back," Vicki answered with a laugh.

Betty Barr smoothed her cap of curls, which Vicki's hugs had sent flying. "I do believe you've grown taller, Vicki," she said. "Or is it those outrageously high heels you're wearing?"

"A little of each." Vicki grinned. "My new co-pilot is so tall I guess I've stretched my neck looking up at him."

"It's a romance," Ginny shouted at the top of her lungs. "Vicki and Dusty! I knew it! I knew it!"

"It's nothing of the sort," Vicki retorted, but she couldn't help blushing a little. Dusty *was* nice, and lots of fun. What would their next assignment be like?

She curled up on the old grey-velvet couch and stared dreamily around the room; at the bowls of flowers from the rock garden, the vases of apple and cherry blossoms on the mantel above the fireplace with its shining brass andirons, and up at the high casement windows that looked like stained glass in the setting sunlight.

No matter how exciting it was to be an airline stewardess, it was best of all to be one of the Barss—and *home!*